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Nehemiah : his character and work : a practical exposition.

NEHEMIAH:

HIS CHARACTER AND WORK.

A Practical Exposition.

BY

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"THE CHRISTIAN VOYAGE," ETC.

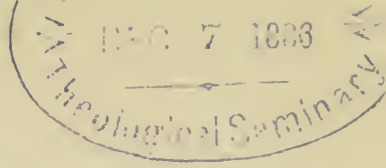
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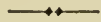
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“Why hast Thou then broken down her hedges, so that all they which pass by the way do pluck her?”—*Psalms* lxxx. 12.

“He that hath no rule over his own spirit is like a city that is broken down, and without walls.”—*Proverbs* xxv. 28.



I.

THE BROKEN WALLS.

Nehemiah i. 1-3.

THE Book of Nehemiah is, in greater part at least, a "chapter of autobiography." Most of it is written in the first person, and purports to come from the pen of Nehemiah himself. There is no reason to doubt that he was the author of this portion of the narrative; and possibly he may have also written those portions which look as if they might have come from the hand of some other chronicler. The book gives an account of the work done by Nehemiah whilst he was Governor of Jerusalem; his reformation of existing abuses; the religious revival which,

in conjunction with Ezra, he was instrumental in effecting ; and, more especially, the great work in which he was himself the prime mover—the restoration of the broken walls of the city.

A brief retrospective glance into Hebrew history will enable us better to understand the condition of affairs which now drew forth the energies of Nehemiah. After Solomon died, the nation, in consequence of the revolt of the ten tribes under Jeroboam, was split into two kingdoms—the kingdom of Israel, with its capital Samaria ; and the kingdom of Judah, with its capital Jerusalem. After being governed by a succession of monarchs, the kingdom of Israel was finally overthrown by the Assyrians : Samaria was taken, and Israel carried away into captivity. About a century and a half later, a similar doom befell the kingdom of Judah. The Babylonians, who had meanwhile risen into supremacy, came down upon Jerusalem, overthrew its walls, burnt the Temple and the other principal buildings of the city, and carried away into exile the great bulk of the

Jewish people. Then, half a century later, Babylon was conquered by Cyrus, and thus Persia became, in turn, the mistress of the world. The exiled Jews now found in Cyrus a more lenient master: a royal decree was issued permitting them to return to the country of their fathers. About 42,000 Jews¹ took advantage of this opportunity, and went back to Jerusalem under Zerubbabel, who was the representative and heir of the royal house of Judah. Of course, Zerubbabel in Jerusalem was simply a "pasha," or governor, under the Persian king; but he and the returned Jews set to work, and by-and-by, stimulated by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, they succeeded in rebuilding the Temple. Fifty years afterwards Ezra the priest came from Babylon with another company of nearly 2,000 Jews, bringing with him a large free-will offering of silver and gold for the enriching and beautifying of the Temple; and then, about fourteen years after this coming of Ezra, Nehemiah appears on the scene.

¹ Some think that this was the number of *men*, representing a population (including women, children, and servants) of about 200,000.

Let us, then, carry our thoughts back to the year 445 B.C.—about ninety years after the return of the first Jewish colony under Zerubbabel. The whole of Palestine was simply a province of the great Persian empire, and the population of Palestine was now of a strangely mixed character. In addition to the Jews themselves, there were not only descendants of the native races of the country, but also colonists from Assyria, Babylon, and Persia, who had come into Palestine since the Captivity. These heathen inhabitants of the country had to some extent intermarried with those Jews who had been left behind at the time of the Captivity; and they also were subject to the Persian rule, and were governed in their various districts by representatives of the Persian monarch. One of the most powerful sections of this heathen or half-heathen population had its head-quarters in Samaria. These Samaritans, who were partly Israelitish in their origin and sympathies, had at first offered to assist Zerubbabel in his work of rebuilding the Temple; but, on his declining their proffered assistance, they had

become the most bitter rivals and enemies of the returned Jewish colony. In common with the neighbouring heathen populations, they were now exceedingly jealous of the restoration of Jerusalem; and, as we shall see, they threw all possible obstacles in the way of Nehemiah, just as they had previously attempted to hinder Zerubbabel. And we know that this antipathy between the Jews and the mixed population of Samaria continued until the time of our Lord; for we read in the Gospel narrative that "the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans."

We are, therefore, to picture the little Jewish colony—ninety years after the return from the exile—as now occupying Jerusalem and the immediate neighbourhood, and as surrounded by these various heathen and half-heathen tribes, more or less hostile. Although the Temple had been rebuilt and beautified, yet the walls and gates of the city were lying desolate. Probably they had never been repaired since the breaches made at the time of the Babylonian conquest; or if, during the governorship of Zerubbabel, they had been in

any measure rebuilt, the hostile Samaritans and other tribes may have once more laid them waste. In any case, Jerusalem was practically an unfortified city, lying open to the attacks of her neighbouring and vigilant foes ; and this was the condition of affairs which was now brought under the notice of Nehemiah.

Nehemiah was at this time cup-bearer to Artaxerxes, the king of Persia, and was resident in the royal palace at Susa. This post of "cup-bearer" seems to have been one of considerable dignity and wealth ; and Nehemiah seems to have been a favourite with the monarch. Doubtless he must have had some idea of the difficulties to which the returned settlers were exposed in distant Jerusalem, but probably he had never realized their actual condition. Now, however, certain Jews, who had perhaps been on a pilgrimage to the Holy City, came to Susa ; and amongst these Jews was his own "brother," or relative, Hanani. Nehemiah takes this opportunity of inquiring minutely into the circumstances of the Jewish colony ; and he receives from

Hanani a vivid and grievous description of the broken walls and burnt gates of Jerusalem, and of the reproach and antagonism to which its citizens were subjected. It was, indeed, a sad and ignominious state of affairs. "A city broken down, and without walls," was, according to the Hebrew proverb, like "a man that hath no rule over his own spirit." Such a man lies open to the incursions of evil. His lack of self-control exposes him to the contempt of his neighbours, even of those who take advantage of his weakness. His soul cannot prosper until, by learning to govern himself, he fortifies his nature against the assaults of temptation. And similarly, under the conditions of life in those old times, no city could well be expected to prosper, so long as it remained unwalled. When the Hebrew prophet predicted the doom of Babylon, the overthrow of her "broad walls" and her "high gates" was one of the prominent features of his picture. An unfortified city provoked contempt and invited attack; and the feeling of insecurity which was thus engendered tended both to weaken the ener-

gies of its citizens, and to prevent the influx of new inhabitants. For ninety years the Jews had been struggling on under this disability. But now Jerusalem was no longer to lie waste. "The hour and the man" had come.

II.

THE PIOUS PATRIOT.

"If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning."—*Psalm cxxxvii.* 5.

"And when He was come near, He beheld the city, and wept over it."—*Luke xix.* 41.

"Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved."—*Romans x.* 1.



II.

THE PIOUS PATRIOT.

Nehemiah i. 4-11.

WHEN Nehemiah received from his brother Hanani the painful intelligence as to the actual condition of the Jewish colony, his heart became heavy with sorrow. He longed to do something for his fatherland. With his practical sagacity he perceived that, if the sad state of Jerusalem was to be remedied at all, it must be by some one who had influence at the Persian court, and who could go, empowered by the king's authority, to carry on and complete the restoration of the city and the settlement of the colony. Why, then, should not he himself be the man? And so he prays earnestly to God ;

and, meanwhile, he watches for an opportunity of asking the king to grant him leave of absence and authority to repair the fortifications of Jerusalem.

Here, then, two features of Nehemiah's character come at once into view—his piety and his patriotism.

That he was a man of *piety* appears from the manner in which he received the intelligence from Judah. The sad news drove him to fasting and prayer, and deepened within him the feeling of penitence on account of his own sins and the sins of his countrymen. He humbled himself before God. He recognized in the present condition of his people the chastising hand of the Most High. He calls to recollection the Divine threatenings of which he had read in the history of Moses, and he confesses that Israel had deserved the execution of those threatenings. But he also calls to recollection the promise of Jehovah that, if the Israelites would only turn unto Him, and do His commandments, He would gather them out of the nations, and bring them again to their fatherland. And so this

man, who was no priest by vocation, ventures, nevertheless, in the true priestly spirit, to intercede with God on behalf of his countrymen. Identifying himself thoroughly with his people, he confesses his own sins, and the sins of his father's house, and the sins of Israel. He thus recognizes the sanctity of the laws which they had all been violating, and acknowledges the righteousness of the Divine dealings in vindication of those laws. Then he casts himself upon the covenant-keeping God, and appeals to the Divine mercy and faithfulness on behalf of his afflicted countrymen. And, thinking of the project which he himself has in view, he prays that God would grant him favour in the sight of Artaxerxes. Nehemiah was not troubled with any of our modern difficulties on the subject of prayer. It never occurred to him to doubt whether there was any use in asking God to prosper his plans. He was about to request Artaxerxes to aid him in his project ; and he believed that, if the king of Persia could render him needful help, much more could the King of kings bless and prosper

his enterprise. And so, with childlike simplicity, he lays his desires before God ; and, believing that God has His own hidden ways of influencing the minds and wills of men, he earnestly asks that he may receive favour in the sight of the king.

Now, this simple, genuine piety is all the more remarkable when we consider that Nehemiah was a courtier in a heathen palace. He had probably been born and bred in the land of exile ; and, although he was doubtless trained with more or less strictness in the religion of his fathers, yet we know only too well how the lessons of piety which are learnt in childhood may fade before the temptations of later years. Moreover, the splendours and luxuries of court-life are not commonly supposed to furnish the best soil for the growth of godliness ; and the atmosphere, especially of a heathen palace, must have been laden with corrupting influences of worldliness and vice. Nehemiah must surely have resisted many a temptation in that Persian court, or his piety would not have so preserved its vitality as to manifest itself in

this fasting and penitence, and earnest, child-like prayer.

Then, again, his *patriotism* is as conspicuous as his piety. Although probably he had never looked upon Jerusalem, yet no sooner does he realize the actual condition of his far-distant countrymen, than his heart is filled with profound sorrow and with an earnest longing to proceed at once to their help. He had doubtless read in the sacred books concerning the earlier glories of his people, and probably he was familiar with snatches of psalm and prophecy which told of the former grandeur of Jerusalem, and the lofty destiny of Israel. And so his heart yearned towards his fatherland. Splendid as was the Susa palace, the holy city towards which he turned in his devotions was dearer to his heart ; and he longed to be the means of restoring her battered walls and gates, and giving back to her some touch of her former greatness. He was willing, moreover, to make no little sacrifice in the cause of patriotism. Even in asking the king for leave of absence on such a mission, he was probably risking the royal

displeasure. No one could well predict how an Oriental despot would be likely to regard such a request. All might depend on the whim or caprice of the moment. That Nehemiah should wish to exchange Susa for Jerusalem—that he should desire to quit, even for a time, the sunlight of the royal presence which was condescending to shine upon him—might possibly be viewed as an insult. The very fact that he was a favourite might only increase the royal irritation. A tyrant likes his pets to appreciate their privileges ; and Nehemiah, by asking for leave of absence, might only lose the royal favour and be deposed from his office. Then, again, even if his request should be granted, he would have to sacrifice, for a time, all the luxury and ease of his present position ; he would have to subject himself to toil and danger ; he would have to face the arduous journey between Susa and Jerusalem ; and then, after arriving in the city of his fathers, he would have to confront the hostility of the surrounding tribes, and might even have to exchange the courtier's robes for the soldier's

armour. But all these sacrifices Nehemiah was prepared to make in the cause of patriotism. His court-life had not enervated his spirit. We are naturally reminded of Moses, who, amid all the splendours of the Egyptian palace, longed to deliver his oppressed brethren, and "chose rather to suffer affliction with the people of God" than to be "called the son of Pharaoh's daughter." Nehemiah, it may be, had often read that old story with the thrill of admiration and the glow of national pride; and possibly it may have helped to keep alive within him, amid all the influences of the Persian court, the fervours of a faithful and enthusiastic patriotism.

An intelligent and manly piety does not destroy or despise any of the natural affections. There is, indeed, a "pietism" which makes light of the ties of home and kindred, which disparages patriotism, as if it were inconsistent with the universal love inspired by the Gospel, or which even ventures to taboo politics as a worldly region which a spiritual man ought rather to avoid. Let us beware of this false spirituality. The world of natural

human relationships is God's world, and not the devil's; and if the devil has intruded into it, there is all the more need that it should be occupied by the earnest soldiers of God. Pietism may say, "Never mind the condition of the walls of Jerusalem: souls are the grand concern." But, in point of fact, the condition of walls may sometimes affect the condition of souls. Things external often stand in subtle relation to things spiritual. The body influences the mind; and the outward conditions of national existence may stand in the closest connection with the religious life of a people. Besides, it is natural that we should love our own country with a special affection; and a true religion does not destroy but consecrates all natural attachments. We may learn from Nehemiah that piety is not incompatible with a practical interest in the prosperity of our country; and a Greater than Nehemiah has shown us, when He wept over doomed Jerusalem, that the loftiest spirituality may co-exist with the intensest patriotism. (Our young men ought to be taught that it is their duty, as well as

their privilege, to interest themselves in the affairs of their country, and to qualify themselves for taking an intelligent share in the obligations of citizenship.

On the other hand, there are many politicians who are no patriots ; and there is also a patriotism in which there is no godliness. There are men who take the keenest interest in politics, merely because it furnishes an arena for the exercise of their faculties, the display of their talents, and the furtherance of their ambitions. And there are also true patriots—real lovers of their country—who yet never recognize the hand of God in national history, who never think of praying to God in connection with their plans, or of submitting their political projects and methods to the test of His will. Now, if a man's patriotism is his only religion, this is doubtless better than that his "god" should be his "belly," and that he should "glory in his shame." But still, this patriotism in which there is no regard for God is fraught with danger. For the grand and prime demand on every one of us is that we be the servants

of the Most High, the soldiers of Christ, the loyal subjects of the Divine kingdom. And then it is our bounden duty to serve God in and through all our natural pursuits, affections, and relationships, and, amongst other things, to bring all our political theories, aims, and methods into the light of Christ and of His Spirit. We want, both in the Church and in the commonwealth, men and women in whom, as in Nehemiah of old, piety and patriotism are blended and intertwined.

III.

THE MAN OF BUSINESS.

"The wisdom of the prudent is to understand his way."—
Proverbs xiv. 8.

"Then he that had received the five talents went and traded with the same, and made them other five talents."—*Matthew*
xxv. 16.



III.

THE MAN OF BUSINESS.

Nehemiah ii. 1-18.

THREE months elapsed before Nehemiah ventured to bring before the king the new-born desire of his heart. When we consider his enthusiastic interest in the city of his fathers, this delay can only be explained on one ground ; he was prudently waiting the right time for action. We cannot, of course, say what were all the reasons that prompted delay ; but perhaps we may conjecture that he was waiting for a favourable opportunity to lay his request before Artaxerxes. It is clear that he was far from being confident as to the issue of his appeal to the king. This is manifest from his repeated prayer to God to grant him favour in the king's sight, and

also from the fact that, when Artaxerxes questioned him as to the cause of his unwonted sadness, he was, as he himself tells us, "sore afraid." Nehemiah well knew the man with whom he had to deal; and therefore it is probable that, during those three months, he was watching for his opportunity. The critical moment comes at last: and, when he is questioned as to the reason of his grief, he answers with so much courtesy and tact that the king grants him leave of absence for a given time, in order to repair the walls of Jerusalem. Finding the monarch in this favourable mood, Nehemiah, forecasting his necessities, like a prudent man of business, asks for letters to the governors of the various provinces through which he would have to pass on his way to Judah, and also a letter empowering him to obtain from "the keeper of the king's forest" in Palestine as much timber as he might require for his projected enterprise. All this Artaxerxes grants; and, constituting his cupbearer temporary "Pasha" of Jerusalem, he sends him on his journey with a military escort.

The practical sagacity of Nehemiah is further manifested by his conduct on his arrival at Jerusalem. He does not at once blurt out the purpose of his mission. Quietly he rests for three days. Before revealing his object to the nobles or to the authorities of the city, he must first see with his own eyes the actual condition of the city walls, that he may discover what is necessary and what is practicable. And so, taking only a few men with him, he goes out in secret, at dead of night, that he may survey, probably by moonlight, the walls and gates of Jerusalem. Then, having matured his plans and determined on his course of action, he at length lays the matter before the people. Nor does he speak to them words of mere authority. He does not say to them, "The king has sent me to command you to do this." He speaks words of encouragement and stimulus. He falls back, not on the royal authority, but on the royal favour. He tells them of the kindness of Artaxerxes, and traces it to the good hand of God. He calls upon them to make a grand voluntary effort to wipe away the

reproach of Jerusalem. And the people responded to his call. Hitherto they had not had the heart to face such an enterprise. But now that the needful leader has come, they rouse themselves to action. And often what people are waiting for is simply a leader—a man of energy, courage, and hopefulness, who can stimulate their zeal by the contagion of his own, and who, at the same time, has practical ability to marshal their powers and to organize and direct their resources.

Such a man was Nehemiah. His strong practical sagacity is manifest throughout the whole record of his work in Jerusalem. And in his case this business ability was blended with enthusiasm. It is by such men—men combining practical sagacity with noble impulse—that the best work of the world is done. Sometimes we find men of enthusiastic zeal or true piety, who have little or no business faculty, who are deficient in powers of observation and management, who lack the tough energy of perseverance, who perhaps scorn tact and prudence, and who have little capability of adapting means to ends. Such

men are apt to become either crotchety or fanatical ; they waste both time and strength on impracticable schemes ; they may have noble aims, but they seek to carry them out by unwise methods ; they damage the cause which they have at heart by their own blundering ; they isolate themselves from those with whom they ought to work, and alienate those whom they ought to conciliate ; they grow impatient of their imperfect instruments and agents ; and, failing to realize the best conceivable, they become careless as to realizing the best practicable. And, on the other hand, we find men of shrewd sagacity and business ability, of keen observation and ready tact, who lack all the higher inspiration of noble and generous impulse ; who are deficient in imagination, affection, and piety ; who have no real enthusiasm even in their business ; and who carry on their practical work with the successful persistency of a cold, clever, and calculating selfishness. A man of this type might have gone to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, if he had been well paid for the work, and if he had received money with which to hire the labour

of the builders ; but he would never have gone, like Nehemiah, impelled by the fervours of a pious patriotism, nor could he have roused the people, as Nehemiah did, to voluntary effort and sacrifice.

The practical business faculty is a gift of no mean order ; but, like all other gifts, it ought to be devoted to the service of God. If a man possesses energy, persistency, tact, quickness in forecasting necessities and results, skill in adapting means to ends, he ought not to regard these powers as mere instruments for the promotion of his own selfish objects. These faculties are part of himself, and he is himself called to live as a servant of God. If any of his business schemes or business methods, however shrewd or skilful they may be, cannot stand the gaze of Christ, then it is at once his wisdom and his duty to renounce them. A man ought both to make his money and to spend his money as in the sight of Christ. For we must all appear before His judgment-seat, and then all trickery and all meanness will be utterly ashamed in His presence. The man of business ought to re-

member that he is trading with the "talents" of the Heavenly Master. He ought therefore to cultivate a generous enthusiasm for righteousness, and to remember that what is reckoned as "profit" in the earthly ledger may perchance be written down as "loss" in the Divine "book of remembrance." Then, again, the exclusive development of mere business faculty is attended with the utmost danger. It is, indeed, a faculty for which we may well thank God; but there are other powers of our nature—some of them higher and more important—which ought also to be exercised. The whole spiritual side of our being, looking out on God, on righteousness, and on eternity, calls for cultivation. Nor ought we to neglect the affections and emotions of the heart. Even the culture of the imagination is not to be despised; it furnishes a healthy counterpoise where the practical faculty is keen and strong. If there be no exercise of the imagination, no deepening of the affections, no quickening of the conscience and the spiritual nature, then a man's practical sagacity may only tend to make him

a hard-headed and hard-hearted worldling. His tact will be constantly degenerating into mere manœuvre, *finesse*, and deceit. His power of managing men will lead him to deal with them as tools. He may thus "get on" in the world, as some people count getting on; he may perhaps gather wealth, and leave it behind him to his heirs. But his own nature will deteriorate; it will become narrow, stunted, and impoverished, and he will never do any of the best kind of work in the world, either for God or for mankind. By all means let a man cultivate practical sagacity; but let him take care to consecrate it to God, and to make it the handmaid of aims that shall be worthy of his spiritual nature. We want neither fanatics nor worldlings, neither unpractical dreamers nor mere selfish tacticians; we want men who, like Nehemiah, are open to the promptings of generous impulse and pure enthusiasm, and at the same time can carry out their projects with wise foresight, patient energy, and prudent self-control.

IV.

RIDICULE CONFRONTED.

"We are become a reproach to our neighbours, a scorn and derision to them that are round about us."—*Psalms* lxxix. 4.

"Who, when He was reviled, reviled not again; when He suffered, He threatened not; but committed Himself to Him that judgeth righteously."—1 *Peter* ii. 23.



IV.

RIDICULE CONFRONTED.

Nehemiah ii. 19, 20.

WE have already seen that the Jewish colony which had returned from the exile, and which was settled in Jerusalem and the immediate neighbourhood, was surrounded on all sides by a heathen and half-heathen population, more or less hostile. These various tribes—the Samaritans and others—although subject, in common with the Jews, to the Persian sway, were jealous of the growing power of the returned settlers, and were united in their desire and endeavour to hinder the restoration of Jerusalem. Nehemiah mentions three of the principal leaders of these hostile tribes. Sanballat was probably a man of great influence among the

Samaritans. He is here called the "Hornite," a designation derived doubtless from either the Upper or Lower Beth-horon, both of which were now Samaritan towns. Tobiah is called "the servant," probably as being an official, amongst the Ammonites, of the Persian king. And Geshem the Arabian, or, as he is elsewhere called, Gashmu, was no doubt the chieftain of some Arab tribe dwelling in South Palestine. When these three men heard that Nehemiah had come and was stirring up the people to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, they laughed the project to scorn, and said in bitter irony, "What is this thing that ye do? Will ye rebel against the king?" They thus mocked at the very idea of the Jews being able to re-fortify their city. And afterwards we read that, even when the work had been actually begun, they still poured out the vials of their contempt on the builders. "What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they do this work all by themselves? Will they finish it to-day? Will they accomplish it by sacrificing to their God? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish

which are burned? Even that which they build, if a fox go up, he shall even break down their stone wall!" But all this ridicule Nehemiah calmly confronted. He believed he was engaged in a good work. "The God of heaven, He will prosper us." And if God was on his side, he could well afford to despise the mockery of his foes.

There are some natures—and these by no means the most ignoble—that are peculiarly sensitive to ridicule. They are apt to become ashamed of convictions or of actions which are subjected to mockery, and then afterwards they are ashamed of their shame. They could meet a blow better than a sneer, and would rather be persecuted than despised. But if we are working in any way for Christ and His kingdom, if we are striving to promote the cause of righteousness and truth, let us learn from Nehemiah to confront mockery with calmness. If we hold certain views on political or religious questions, let us, indeed, make sure that we are holding them on good grounds; but let us not give them up, or be ashamed of them, merely because we may be

sneered at as being "behind the age." There is an intellectual self-conceit which shelters its own ignorance behind the authority of great names, and all but exhausts its own shallow powers in flippant sarcasm and clever scorn. Or, again, if we take an interest in Christian missions, or try to teach a few children in a Sunday-school, or aim at lifting some of our companions into a more thoughtful life, let us not give up our endeavours merely because some Sanballat or Tobiah may jeer at us. If our work is one which the God of heaven is likely to smile upon and prosper, we can afford to despise all this foolish scorn. If, indeed, ridicule should at any time reveal to us some weak point in our enterprises or methods, let us be wise enough "to learn even from an enemy." But of one thing we may be sure, that the man who mocks at Christian endeavour is generally a shallow and foolish person. It takes no great amount either of intellect or energy to "sit in the chair of the scorner," and sneer at men who are working or striving to work in the cause of God and of humanity.

Or, again, if we are seeking to build up our own character into true godliness, let us learn to confront all ridicule with calmness. Every man's soul ought to be as a holy city in which the Spirit of God may dwell. It is a city which needs to be well fortified against our spiritual foes. And if, through our own sinful weakness or evil habits, breaches have been made in the walls, it is our wisdom and duty to strive, by God's blessing, to build them up again. We ought to watch ourselves at the weak points of our character, and try to fortify them, so that they may present a stronger front against temptation. Now, if a young man is thus bent on living a religious life, if he is resolutely chaste in speech and conduct, if he is respectful and affectionate towards his father and mother, if he is reverent and thoughtful in his treatment of sacred subjects, then let him not be ashamed when he is sneered at as "goody" by those who think it manly to tell impure stories, and to speak slightly of their parents, and to talk flippantly on the most sacred realities. Let them fling about their epithets as they

will. There can be no highest manliness where there is no godliness. Keep a good conscience and a pure heart, and "the God of heaven will prosper you." "Add to your faith virtue ; and to virtue knowledge ; and to knowledge temperance ; and to temperance patience ; and to patience godliness ; and to godliness brotherly kindness ; and to brotherly kindness charity." Thus adding stone to stone, seek, in spite of all mockery, to fortify your soul against temptations, and to build up your character into solidity and strength.

V.

HONOURABLE MENTION.

"A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches."—*Proverbs* xxii. 1.

"Help those women which laboured with me in the Gospel, with Clement also, and with other my fellow-labourers, whose names are in the book of life."—*Philippians* iv. 3.



V.

HONOURABLE MENTION.

Nehemiah iii.

THIS chapter contains a catalogue of the leading citizens and families that came to the help of Nehemiah, and specifies the portions of the city walls and the various gates which they severally undertook to repair. The account begins and also ends with "the sheep-gate;" and the builders are frequently spoken of as working "next" to each other; from which we may probably infer that the description covers the entire circuit of the walls, and specifies, in their order, those portions which needed restoration. It was natural that the Pasha should thus make "honourable mention" of those who came to

the front, and threw their energies into this patriotic work. Nehemiah was doubtless anxious to hand down to posterity the names of all who were leaders in the movement ; he did not wish to take to himself the whole credit of the work ; we may be sure that he wrote down this register of names with both pleasure and pride.

We find that priests, rulers, merchants, and tradesmen all took a share in this enterprise ; and, where the work of the Lord is concerned, it is only becoming that there should be this unity of spirit and division of labour. Often, in our modern Christian Churches, too much is left to the ministers of religion ; and sometimes one man is expected to do a work which ought to be shared by a whole congregation. The merchant and tradesman will sometimes plead the engrossing claims of business or the pressure of "bad times" as a reason for holding aloof from the varied efforts of Christian benevolence ; and it is to be feared also that some of our modern aristocrats are prevented by the haughty and foolish pride of rank from throwing their energies and influence into the activities of

the Christian Church. It was doubtless not without a touch of scorn that, when Nehemiah in the course of his catalogue, comes to mention the repairs done by the Tekoites, he adds that "their nobles put not their necks to the work of their Lord." We can conceive how their apathy would rouse the indignation of the patriot, and that he might find a certain satisfaction, after the work was done, in thus placing these nobles in a historic pillory!

More pleasant is it to find mention made of the "daughters" of Shallum as rendering their assistance in the patriotic enterprise. The zeal of these women may have stimulated not a few of the men to more active endeavours; and the fact that their father Shallum was a "ruler" may have lent additional weight to the influence of their example. The patriotism of women has played no insignificant part in the history of nations. Miriam and Deborah are types of noble womanhood. The Spartan mother fired her son with a loftier courage as she sent him forth to do battle for his country. (And, whatever may be said as to the propriety of excluding women from the turbulent region of

practical politics, few will venture to deny that it is a healthy sign when the women of a country take an intelligent and enthusiastic interest in the national prosperity.) Most healthful also is it for any Christian Church when its women throw themselves with zeal into enterprises of Christian benevolence. St. Paul speaks of "those women which laboured with him in the Gospel;" and there are many departments of Christian activity in which women can fulfil a mission and wield an influence peculiarly their own.

One other point in Nehemiah's catalogue is worthy of a passing notice. He mentions concerning several of the builders, that they repaired those portions of the wall which were "over against" their dwellings. These men undertook the duty which came most readily to hand as lying at their own doors. Would it not be well for some of us nowadays, when we are asking ourselves what work we can do for Christ, to look near home? How much stronger the Christian Jerusalem would become if the head of every Christian family were striving to strengthen the religious life of his own household, and if every Christian

congregation were seeking to exert a spiritual influence in its own neighbourhood ! It is, indeed, our duty to render what help we can to the cause of Foreign Missions ; but perchance there may be also a still nearer obligation to “ build over against our own house.”

To us Nehemiah’s catalogue of the builders may now seem to be little more than a dry register of names. But it is not difficult to imagine how interesting it may have been for generations after it was written. As Jerusalem began to grow again in power and splendour, men would scan with eager interest the list of those who had engaged in such a brave and self-denying work. We can imagine how, centuries later, the eye of some young boy might kindle with pride and enthusiasm when he read here, in one of the sacred books, the name of some ancestor of his own, who had nobly borne his part in building up the walls of Jerusalem. It is a grand thing to come of a patriotic or godly lineage. To be able to look back to ancestors who have laboured zealously and faithfully in the service of God and of humanity, must be an inspiration to

any soul that is unspoilt by vice or worldliness. If any Christian has the opportunity of transmitting a name that shall be honoured in the annals of his country, let him not despise it; for the duties of patriotism and the labours of practical statesmanship furnish one of the best spheres in which he can serve the Heavenly King. But even if our sphere should be only an obscure one, let us seek so to fill it, in reverence for God and in love to man, that some who survive us, and especially our children—if we have any—may remember us as those who “had a mind” to render help in the cause of Christ, and not as those who refused to “put their necks to the work of the Lord.” Our names may appear in no record or register of earthly fame, and may soon die out of the memories of men; but “a book of remembrance is written before the Lord;” and “if any man’s work” which he builds on the one foundation “abides,” he “shall receive a reward.” God has His own list of the famous obscure—the “unknown and yet well known”—whose “names are written,” with honourable mention, in “the Lamb’s book of life.”

VI.

THE SOLDIER-BUILDERS.

“But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon.”--
1 *Corinthians* iii. 10.

“But ye, beloved, building up yourselves on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Ghost, keep yourselves in the love of God.”—*Jude* 20, 21.

“Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation.”—
Matthew xxvi. 41.

“Put on the whole armour of God.”—*Ephesians* vi. 11.



VI.

THE SOLDIER-BUILDERS.

Nehemiah iv.

WHEN Sanballat and the other enemies of Jerusalem saw that "the feeble Jews" at whom they had sneered were actually prosecuting their task with unexpected rapidity and vigour, they were no longer content to use the weapons of ridicule. The various hostile tribes entered into a conspiracy to come and fight together against the city whose restoration aroused their jealousy. They threatened a sudden and secret assault; and we may well believe that they intended to execute their threat. But Nehemiah was too brave to be daunted by their antagonism, and too wary to give them the opportunity they

sought. He prayed to God, and set a watch against them day and night. He had also to contend with faint-hearted friends, as well as resolute foes. Some of those who were engaged in the work being doubtless alarmed by the rumours of attack, began to complain of the magnitude and burden of the task; there was "too much rubbish;" their strength was failing them; they did not see how they could any longer carry on the work! It would seem, too, that some of the Jews outside of Jerusalem, who lived in the immediate neighbourhood of the hostile tribes, used to come into the city trembling in their shoes, and bringing with them rumours of approaching danger. But the brave and pious spirit of Nehemiah proved adequate to the emergencies of the crisis. He appears to have sustained his own soul by constant prayer. He encouraged and exhorted the people both to bravery and faith: "Be not ye afraid of them: remember the Lord, which is great and terrible, and fight for your brethren, your sons, and your daughters, your wives, and your houses." His prudence also was conspicuous.

He turned all his workers into soldiers. His faith in a Higher Power did not lead him to relax his vigilance. He was determined that the enemy should not come upon them unawares. Half of his own personal retinue continued at the work of building ; the other half held the weapons of warfare. Then, with regard to the people generally who were engaged in the work, every burden-bearer and every builder was an armed man, working either with a weapon in one hand or with a sword girded by his side. As for Nehemiah himself, he was now both architect and general. A trumpeter was constantly with him, so that, as the builders were scattered all over the wall, they might at any moment be summoned, if necessary, into one compact phalanx. Orders, moreover, were issued that all the labourers should stay over-night within the city itself, so that its defence might be the more secure. Nehemiah and his own body-guard even slept in their clothes, ready to spring up, if necessary, at dead of night, and head the army of soldier-builders. This combination of prayerfulness and prudence, of

✓ faith and vigilance, reminds us of our own Cromwell, who was also not unlike Nehemiah in his self-denying patriotism, his resolute courage, his organizing faculty, and the zeal which led him to identify the enemies of the Commonwealth with the "enemies of the Lord."

Now, although we are not bound to regard Nehemiah as by any means a perfect man, yet surely we may consider this blending of faith, courage, and prudence as worthy both of admiration and imitation. There can be no doubt that these three elements are to be found in the highest types of character. Wherever there is a marked deficiency in any one of the three, the character loses both in symmetry and in power.

Sometimes we find a brave man who lacks both faith and prudence. In this case his courage is very apt to degenerate into a foolish bravado ; and possibly he may do more harm than good by his unwise daring. Such courage, too, is often more dependent on a vigorous *physique* than the man himself knows. Animal courage, indeed, is by no means to

be despised. A vigorous body, full of sound nerves, strong muscles, and healthy blood, is a thing to be desired, and, if possible, to be cultivated. There are emergencies in life when a fund of animal courage may be most valuable to a man in helping him to do his duty, and in enabling him to render efficient service to others. Weak nerves may sometimes go far to paralyze the external action of the most devoted love. A man cannot have too strong and healthy a body, if only he has something higher and better besides. But a courage which is chiefly due to animal spirits and athletic vigour is apt to disappear when the physical frame loses its elasticity. There is many a man proud of his own "pluck," as he calls it, who would be simply astounded at the effect produced upon his spirit by some forms of illness. Such courage, moreover, when it is backed by no higher bravery, is of little value in the resistance of temptation. There are men brave enough to face a garotter in the dark, who have not the courage needed to bear an insult with meekness, or to rebuke the ribaldry of an ungodly companion. The

scourge and terror of the Philistines may become a mere plaything in the lap of Delilah. The duellist braves death because he has not the courage to brave society. Whereas there is many a feeble woman of vivid imagination and constitutional timidity, who becomes bravely calm and strongly resolute in some terrible crisis of temptation, because she is upheld by a moral courage which lifts her above the tyranny of fear.

Again: when prudence is the marked feature of a character that is deficient in both faith and courage, it is apt to degenerate into selfish cunning and calculating cowardice. When a man has no confidence either in himself or in God, his shrewdness may lead him into the very depths of baseness. When he is reduced to one weapon—and that his own ingenuity—he may be strongly tempted to use it as a dagger in the dark. The brave will scorn methods of action which the timid, if unprincipled, may welcome. The false weight and measure, the commercial trick, the fraudulent bankruptcy, the unscrupulous falsehood, the diplomatic manœuvring of selfish ambition,

the trap laid for the unsuspecting confidence of friendship—these are the resort of the men who unite the cunning of the serpent and the rapacity of the hawk with the heart of the hare. In the absence of all faith, a timid, selfish shrewdness is even more dangerous than an impetuous and imprudent courage.

But even when courage and prudence are found united, the character is still sadly defective, if there be no spiritual faith. A man who begins and carries on his enterprises without humility or prayer, who never recognizes a Higher Power on whom he is dependent for strength, and skill, and success, is apt to fall into an unbecoming and dangerous self-sufficiency. We all like to see a modest dignity—a self-reliance which springs from the humble consciousness of God's gifts and God's protection. But a proud self-confidence is utterly unbecoming in any mortal, and is sure, sooner or later, to meet with a downfall. There are emergencies in life which are apt to crush a man who is unsustained by trust in God ; and a spiritual faith will conquer temptations which mere pru-

dence or courage cannot overcome. Peter had courage enough to venture out on the water ; but he had not faith enough to keep him from sinking. By natural temperament he was a brave man ; and so vivid was his consciousness of personal courage, that he felt sure he could never forsake his Master ; but when the emergency came at last, his self-confidence met with a terrible fall. It was when his faith in the risen Lord added spiritual courage to his natural bravery that he became indeed a "man of *rock*." Then the rugged fisherman who had braved many a storm on the Galilean lake became a "fisher of men," bold enough to face tempests of trial and hurricanes of persecution.

On the other hand, faith without prudence may degenerate into fanaticism, or into a "quietism" which cultivates the passive to the neglect of the active virtues. There are Christian men who would not at all approve of a farmer's expecting a harvest through "the prayer of faith" without sowing his seed or tilling his soil, but who, nevertheless, where religious or benevolent enterprise is con-

cerned, seem to think that faith and prayer may dispense with the counsels and methods of ordinary prudence. Now, I would not deny that, in our religious work, we are apt to rely too much on human sagacity and organization, and to look too little to the blessing and the Spirit of God. But this is no reason why we should rush to the opposite extreme, and say that, where the walls of Jerusalem are concerned, we have simply to build on in faith and prayer, and need take no measures as against the foe. Where is this fanaticism to stop? If we may dispense with the sword, why not also with the trowel? If God is to work a miracle to save us from the enemy, why should He not also work a miracle to rebuild the walls themselves? Nay, if we are to show our faith in God by ignoring all natural means and methods, and simply praying to Him for His blessing, why should we not show our faith by simply trusting Him without ever praying at all? But surely faith does not mean the abnegation of our rational faculties. We have simply no right to cast ourselves down from

the pinnacle, merely to prove that we trust our Father. Nor does God promise that, in answer to the prayer of faith, He will save us from the consequences of our own imprudence. When He summons us to work or to fight for Him, He summons us also to trust in Him for protection and maintenance ; for He does not expect us to "go a warfare at our own charges." But He does expect that we shall not throw away either trowel, or sword, or shield.

Then, too, in relation to our own personal conduct in ordinary life, and in relation to the upbuilding of our own character into solidity and strength, we need courage and prudence as well as faith. It has, indeed, been contended by some, and even formulated into a kind of doctrine, that, if we would attain to a higher holiness, we must simply consecrate ourselves to God, and abide in the attitude of faith towards Christ. They tell us that our own efforts and struggles against temptation are all a mistake ; that the true way to sanctification is through "the rest of faith," and that we ought simply to trust in Christ to

keep us from sin. Now, doubtless there is an element of truth in this teaching. It is quite true that we may carry on the conflict against evil too much in our own strength. It is quite true that prayer will often bring us a victory which mere struggle of itself cannot win. It is also true that, by keeping near to Christ in the spirit of our mind, we are lifted on to a plane of thought and feeling which puts us beyond the pressure of some forms of temptation. But is there no spiritual effort involved in earnest prayer? Is there no conflict implied in maintaining the attitude of faith towards Christ, and of fellowship with His Spirit, and of consecration to His will? Or, again, is the Holy Spirit given us simply that we may lie passive under His influences? Is He not given in order to stir up our souls to energetic activity, to quicken our aspirations, and to energize our wills in the direction of goodness and virtue? If all we have to do is simply to trust in Christ to keep us from sin, why does Christ Himself exhort us to "watch" as well as to "pray?" Why are we summoned to "put on the whole armour

of God"—to "resist the devil"—to be "vigilant"—to "walk circumspectly"—to "work out our own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God that worketh in us?" Yes: here we have the two sides of the truth. God is working in us; but He is working in us to stir us up to all holy energy. We are to trust, but we are also to build; and we are to build in our armour, ready for the foe. Faith, courage, prudence; we need all three, both in Christian life and in Christian enterprise. Let us therefore "pray *and* set a watch," and then work on, with trowel in hand, and with the sword girded by our side!

VII.

THE FRIEND OF THE POOR.

"Thou hast taken usury and increase, and thou hast greedily gained of thy neighbours by extortion, and hast forgotten Me, saith the Lord God."—*Ezekiel* xxii. 12.

"Blessed is he that considereth the poor."—*Psalms* xli. 1.



VII.

THE FRIEND OF THE POOR.

Nehemiah v.

WE now come to another feature of Nehemiah's character—his tender and unselfish generosity. It appears that whilst the building of the wall was going forward, a complaint was laid before him by the poorer members of the community. It is probable enough that the poorer families who had returned from the exile had never been able to make an independent position for themselves. They were living in "hard times." There appears to have been a dearth of corn. The imperial taxes seem to have been heavy. And perhaps the work to which Nehemiah had summoned them, and which

had taken away many from their ordinary employments, had still further drained their resources. In consequence of all this, a gigantic system of money-lending and pawn-broking had sprung up in the community. The poor had been compelled to borrow money from the wealthy, both to buy corn for their families and to pay "the king's tribute." For this money the rich were charging interest at the rate of "one-hundredth," *i.e.*, probably one-hundredth *per month*, or twelve per cent. per annum. Then, in order to obtain these loans, many of the poor had been obliged to pawn their property, to "mortgage their houses, lands, and vineyards," so that until they repaid the money they were prevented from reaping any harvest on their own fields. Hence some of them had been under the necessity of even selling their sons and daughters, as slaves, to their wealthy neighbours. All this produced a misery which at length became utterly intolerable. The poor felt that an unbrotherly and unjust advantage was being taken of their poverty. They regarded it as a crying shame that they should

be compelled to sell their children to their "brethren;" and yet they saw no prospect of being able to escape from the sad straits to which their necessities had driven them. Their misery at length found vent in an outcry, loud and deep, against the usury and oppression of the nobles.

Now Nehemiah, as we have seen, was a business man—a man of great energy and prudence; and it would not have been strange if he had postponed the consideration of the complaints thus brought before him. He might naturally enough have been afraid lest, by now finding fault with the nobles and rulers, he should alienate them from himself, and thus hinder the completion of his great enterprise. And so he might have said to these poor people, "You see that my hands are full of work; I cannot attend to this matter now;—one thing at a time. No doubt you have a grievance, but let us get the walls finished first, and then I will see what can be done." It is thus that many men of business act in daily life. Their very energy leads them to brush aside everything that threatens

to interfere with their present work. They cannot bear interruptions, and are so eagerly bent on reaching their end that they cannot pause to do good on their way.

But Nehemiah was more than a mere man of business ; he was a man with a tender heart. The cry of the poor awoke his pity for their sufferings, and aroused his indignation against the usurers. The bravest hearts are often the tenderest, and Nehemiah could not bear to think that all this misery should continue when there was so much wealth in the community. He may even have felt that the condition of the citizens was now a matter of more pressing importance than the condition of the city walls. These rich nobles and money-lenders, moreover, were violating the laws written in the sacred books. The law forbade the Israelite to take any usury or interest from his poorer brethren. The Book of Exodus contains the command, "If thou lend money to any of My people that is poor by thee, thou shalt not be to him as an usurer, neither shalt thou lay upon him usury." The law also forbade the buying and selling of

Jews as bondslaves. "If thy brother that dwelleth by thee be waxen poor, and be sold unto thee; thou shalt not compel him to serve as a bondservant: but as an hired servant, and as a sojourner, he shall be with thee, and shall serve thee unto the year of jubilee." The Hebrew legislation was very careful of the rights and welfare of the poor; and many of its statutes might be studied with advantage by some modern Christians. The limitations of pawnbroking, for example, were very significant. "No man shall take the nether or the upper millstone to pledge: for he taketh a man's life to pledge." And again: "If the man be poor, thou shalt not sleep with his pledge: in any case thou shalt deliver him the pledge again when the sun goeth down, that he may sleep in his own raiment, and bless thee." Nehemiah felt that the wealthy nobles were violating both the letter and the spirit of these old laws. They were not dealing with their poor countrymen as with "brethren." They were rather enriching themselves out of their neighbour's poverty. They were exacting interest—they

were reaping the harvests of those fields which they held in pawn; they were even taking the children of their debtors into bondage. Nehemiah was, we are told, "very angry."

But, though very angry, he nevertheless "consulted with himself." Even righteous indignation is often too precipitate in its expression, and vents itself in a fuming and storming which does little or no good. But the fervid feeling of Nehemiah was blended with practical wisdom. He took counsel with himself as to what was best to be done. He came to the conclusion that these grievances of the poor must at once be redressed. He resolved to make an appeal to the consciences and better feelings of the wealthy. And so, calling a public assembly, he rebuked them for their ungenerous and unbrotherly conduct. He reminded them that their behaviour was such as might even bring upon them the reproach of the heathen. He appealed to them to leave off exacting interest for the moneys which they had lent to the poor, and also to restore the houses and lands and vineyards which they held in pledge. All

this being said in public assembly, the nobles had an opportunity of openly vindicating their conduct. But they held their peace. They had no justification to offer. Their consciences seem to have been stirred ; for they agreed to forego all interest, and to restore at once the pledges which they held. Then Nehemiah, calling in the priests, bound all the creditors by a solemn oath, publicly administered, to fulfil this promise. Thus a load was lifted from off the hearts of the poor ; and we may well believe that a load was also lifted from off the consciences of the wealthy. "All the congregation," we are told, "praised the Lord."

Here, then, we have another evidence of the remarkable personal influence of Nehemiah. There must have been a healthy contagion about the character of a man who could thus evoke and restore to the community the sense of brotherhood. What is the explanation of the influence by which he thus moved the nobles ? One secret of it lies close at hand ; he could point them to his own example. He was not asking them

to do anything more than he was doing himself. He reminded them how he and others in the land of exile had "redeemed their brethren who had been sold unto the heathen." He reminded them how he himself had lent money and corn to the poor, and that he did not intend to take any interest. The life, too, which he was living amongst them as Pasha of Jerusalem was itself a rebuke to their niggardliness. The governors who had been before him—Zerubabel and the rest—had always drawn their official allowance from the community. But Nehemiah, in consideration of the heavy burdens which were pressing upon the people, had never drawn the allowance to which he was legally entitled. Nor had he ever by his loans acquired mortgages of land. He had also given the services of his own personal retinue to the work of rebuilding the walls, and had charged nothing for their labour. Moreover, as Pasha, he had kept "open table" daily for as many as one hundred and fifty guests, and all at his own expense. As he had merely obtained leave of absence

from the Persian court, he probably still held the post of cupbearer ; and this doubtless enabled him to make these personal sacrifices. But the fact that he did make them was one element in the power of the appeal which he now addressed with such success to the nobles. He had a right to speak to them. His generosity rebuked their selfishness.

And here again Nehemiah is well worthy of our imitation. Consideration for the rights, and compassion for the struggles, of the poor ought to be characteristic features of every Christian. Christ has brought home to our hearts and consciences a sense of human brotherhood, and has taught us by His own example to recognize the claims of poverty and suffering. I envy not the man who can trade on the miseries of the poor, who can deliberately make capital out of the extremity of a neighbour, who lends money at exorbitant interest to some struggling fellow-creature, and who increases his demands in proportion to the desperation of his victim—such a man is a human vampire ! If you

lend money in the way of business to those who trade with it, you are entitled to a reasonable interest on your loan. But surely, if a struggling brother comes to you in his need, and asks you for temporary help in a present difficulty, then, if you can afford to lend him money at all, and if you feel that you can really help him by doing so, the very least you ought to do is to lend it to him without interest. Invest your money, if you will, in bank or railway shares, and look for your dividends ; but take care never to enrich yourself out of the despairing struggles of the poor. And yet there is a divine way of enriching yourself out of the poor. "He that giveth to the poor lendeth to the Lord." "Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate ; laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come." We are not, indeed, saved by works ; nevertheless those who are saved by faith will receive a reward of grace "according to their deeds." And, not to speak of "the time to come," there is a present wealth accruing to

those who show generosity and kindness. Every deed of loving sympathy enriches the heart of the doer of it ; his nature becomes wider and deeper because of it. The less he thinks of himself, the more does his soul profit by his benevolence. There is, moreover, the joy of doing good, the happiness of seeing others happy, or even of lightening the burden that rests on the worn and weary. Is there no "interest" in that ? There is many a rich man whose soul is simply impoverished by his own avarice or by his own self-indulgence. He may understand the pleasures of the table, or the pleasures of an elegant house, or the pleasures of a high dividend ; but he has yet to learn the luxury of a generous beneficence that causes the widow's heart to sing for joy. He may pride himself on his shrewd investments ; but, in neglecting the poor and the struggling, he is missing the Divine investment which would bring him a most blessed "usury."

But not only did Nehemiah manifest a tender and practical sympathy with the sufferings of the poor ; he also made generous

sacrifices for the welfare of Jerusalem—foregoing his allowance as governor, and devoting his own means to the patriotic enterprise which had brought him from Persia. We need more men of this stamp in the modern Church. Our “Jerusalem” is the kingdom of Christ. If we are in any wise loyal to the Lord Jesus, we ought to do what we can to fortify the Christian Zion, and to make it more influential for good in the world. We want more of the patriotism of the Christian Church, more willingness to make personal sacrifices in the cause of religion. There is something far wrong when men calling themselves Christians will spend large sums of money on the furnishing and decoration of their own houses, on their gardens, their dinner-parties, and their fashionable amusements, and then, whenever they are called upon to subscribe to home or foreign missions, will ask themselves how little they can give to the kingdom of Christ. No doubt a man’s first and religious duty is to “provide” honestly for himself and “his own house.” But when it comes to be a question

of superfluity, of costly luxury, not to say ostentation, a man may well pause and ask himself whether what he is spending in the cause of religion and benevolence bears any reasonable proportion to what he is spending on and in his own house.

We have all need to arouse ourselves to a recognition of our stewardship. It is not only our money for which we are responsible to Christ. Nothing that we have is absolutely "our own." Our time, our physical strength, our mental faculties, our personal influence, are "talents" entrusted to our keeping by the Great Master, and ought to be employed as under His eye. It is not the rich only who can help the needy. It is not the rich only who can aid in building up the Christian Jerusalem. The poor are often the best friends of the poor, and in many ways can show tenderness and sympathy. Many of the noblest workers, too, in the Christian Church, have been men of few possessions, but of loving devotion. We can all covet and cultivate a spirit like that of Nehemiah. If a man has a mean, hard, selfish, churlish heart,

then, whether he have much or little of this world's goods, he is poor indeed ; and his poverty will be revealed, one day, to his own soul. But, just in proportion as we have a large, generous, godly, tender spirit, we are truly "rich"—rich in the very best wealth that even God can give.

VIII.

STRATAGEM DEFEATED.

"Go ye, and tell that fox, Beho'd, I cast out devils, and I do cures to-day and to-morrow, and the third day I shall be perfected."—*Luke* xiii. 32.

"Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves : be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves."—*Mat. heu* x. 16.



VIII.

STRATAGEM DEFEATED.

Nehemiah vi.

WE have seen how the tribes which were hostile to Jerusalem banded themselves together to oppose Nehemiah in his pious and patriotic work. We have also seen how he confronted their ridicule, and how he met their threats of war. We are now to see how they tried stratagem, and how he defeated all their manœuvring.

Their first manœuvre was to propose a conference. They sent messengers to Nehemiah, saying, "Come, let us meet together in some one of the villages in the plain of Ono." Ono probably lay between Jerusalem and Samaria. The proposal, therefore, was that they

should meet half-way, and take counsel together as to the relations which were thenceforth to subsist between Jerusalem and the neighbouring tribes. But Nehemiah detected "mischief." Probably their real object was to capture, or perhaps even to assassinate him. Four times they proposed this conference; and four times Nehemiah refused. He sent messengers to say, "I am doing a great work, and I cannot leave it to come down to you."

The second manœuvre was a deeper one. Sanballat sends a servant with an open letter (which any one might read), telling Nehemiah that certain rumours were afloat regarding him—that it is "commonly reported" among the surrounding tribes that he intends to make himself king of Judah, and that this is the reason why he is rebuilding the city walls. To give him some idea of the importance of the rumour, Sanballat further informs him that "Gashmu, the Arabian"—a man of some influence—is spreading it, and reminds him that it is sure to reach the ears of Artaxerxes. Would it not therefore be better for Nehemiah

to come and take counsel with them, so as to clear his character from all such aspersions? But Nehemiah sees through this stratagem also. He can afford to overlook such slanders. Indeed, he tells Sanballat that he does not believe that any such reports are generally current: "Thou feignest them out of thine own heart."

The third manœuvre was the deepest of all. Sanballat and Tobiah now make an appeal to the piety of Nehemiah. They hire a false prophet, named Shemaiah, who professes to speak in the name of the Lord, and who tells Nehemiah that his enemies will come and kill him unless he takes refuge in the Temple and shuts himself up therein. The object of this stratagem was either to terrify Nehemiah from his post as superintendent of the builders, or perhaps to lower him in the eyes of the people by getting him to desecrate the holy place. But here again they were unsuccessful. Nehemiah's very piety was his safeguard. He would not desecrate the Temple of God. He could not believe that this Shemaiah was a true prophet. He "per-

ceived that God had not sent him." And so he continued to carry on the work with vigour and courage ; and ere long Jerusalem was once more a city fortified against her foes.

Now, from all this we may learn the lesson that a true and single aim is the best safeguard against the wiles and seductions that would lead us out of the path of duty. Nehemiah had one thing in view ; he had no by-views of his own to serve ; he had no selfish ambitions to promote. To fortify Jerusalem was his one object ; and this simplicity of aim fortified himself against the machinations of his enemies. He would allow nothing to draw him aside from the completion of his enterprise.

Similar stratagems have often been tried in order to prevent some patriot or reformer from accomplishing the work on which his heart is set. Sometimes the attempt is made to distract his attention to minor matters, or to divert his energies into minor controversy, or, by friendly overtures and social blandishments, to weaken his purpose and draw him

into compromise. In all ages worldly statesmen have tried such manœuvres with earnest souls: "Come down, and meet us in the plain of Ono!" Then, when this fails, they try slander; they set some false rumour afloat, and represent it as being more current than it is; they quote some "Gashmu" — some man of note and influence—as their authority for the slander; they represent the reformer as being actuated by selfish ambition or hare-brained vanity—as seeking anything but the welfare of his country and the progress of truth and justice. And then, when this also fails, perhaps they begin to speak in the name of religion, to assign religious reasons why he should desist from his work, to call his doctrines heresies and his reforms sacrilege, and to predict personal calamity if he shall persist in his endeavours. Well is it for any country when the true patriot or reformer is, like Nehemiah, proof against all such manœuvres, when his very simplicity of aim and purity of motive enable him to hold on to his purpose with tenacity of grasp, when he refuses to be distracted by minor contro-

versies or social blandishments, when he goes on his way in spite of malignant slander, and when he feels that the real sacrilege would lie in giving up his duty and taking refuge in religion as an asylum for his cowardice.

But it is not only great statesmen or patriots who are thus tried by the stratagems of their opponents. Every earnest man, however humble his sphere, who is seeking to do some work for God, or who is striving to build up his own character into moral and spiritual robustness, is liable to be seduced from the path of duty. The Scripture speaks of "the wiles of the devil," the "devices" of Satan. Evil often presents itself to the soul in subtle disguises. The stealthy cunning of the serpent remains a fitting emblem of temptation. And seduction is often far more dangerous than persecution. The downright, straightforward antagonism of persecution often rouses a soul to manly and heroic resistance ; but when the tempter begins to manœuvre, then the same soul may possibly fall into the snare.

* Here, for example, is a young man who is seeking to live the Christian life. Daily he

prays to God for grace and strength. He is striving to build up habits which shall be as fortifications of Christian character. And some bad men who are looking on—it may be in the same warehouse or workshop—cannot bear to see his character strengthening under their very eyes. His virtues are a tacit rebuke to their own vices. They therefore resolve—for there are such devils in human shape—to ruin him, if they can. They will try to make him such an one as themselves, or worse. Perhaps they feel that mere ridicule would be unavailing. Perhaps they feel that all open antagonism would only lead him to separate himself the more from their influence, and to pursue the more earnestly his own course of action. And so they try stratagem. “Come and meet us in the plain of Ono!” They do not ask him to give up his virtuous life. They do not say to him, “Come with us and serve the devil!” No; but, “Come and meet us, and talk over matters. What harm in that? Why so puritanical? Come, and let us have a jolly night together!” They know that, if they can only get him into their companion-

ship, they will have some chance of stopping all his building of virtuous character. And, alas! there is many a man who began his career with good motives and desires, but who can trace back his downward course to its first step when he went down into "the plain of Ono," to hold parley and keep company with the enemies of godliness.

But, even if a man should resist all such overtures of the ungodly, he is not safe from their wiles. Perhaps they will next try slander, and contrive that the slander shall reach his own ears. Perhaps they may say concerning him, "Ah! we know his game—the canting Methodist! He is not by any means so good as he seems. He has his own ends in view. Just ask 'Gashmu' what *he* thinks of him! *He* knows him well. Get *him* to give you his private opinion of the man!"

And all this they will say, in the hope that, when these rumours reach his own ears, he may be led to live what they call a "freer" life, in order to rebut this accusation of Pharisaism and hypocrisy. They think, perhaps,

that he may even join their company, in order to give the lie to such slanders ; or, if he should still hold on his Christian course, they have at any rate set afloat such rumours as may tend to lessen his influence or injure his interests.

Here, again, our grand safeguard is a true and single aim. If we are simply bent on serving God and doing the right, we shall not be so likely to leave the path of duty, merely to guard our own reputation. Good name and influence are indeed worth preserving ; we are not to be indifferent to slander, or always to pass it by without notice : but we may be sure that all reputation and influence are too dearly bought at the cost of violating our own conscience. Kill Gashmu's slander, if you can, and if it is worth the trouble ; but if, in order to kill his slander, you are tempted to lower the tone and habits of your life, then hold on your Christian course, and let Gashmu prate as he will !

But even then we are not safe from the wiles of the devil. The most seductive temptation of all to a godly man is when Satan comes as

a "false prophet," or in the guise of "an angel of light." The false prophet who was hired by Sanballat would fain have persuaded Nehemiah that God wished him to desist from his work and to shut himself up in the Temple.

This is the very masterpiece of the enemy—to get us to do evil in the name of religion ; to make us think that it is our duty to give up our duty ; to persuade us that zeal is fanaticism, that earnestness is bigotry, that a watchful temperance is a morbid asceticism, that a conscientious integrity is a foolish scrupulosity, that purity is prudery, that cowardice is prudence ; or, on the other hand, to persuade us that our intolerant bigotry is a true zeal for God, that our Pharisaic asceticism is a higher life, that our reasonable prudence is an unbelieving timidity. "The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose." He seeks to draw men aside from the true service of God, by perverting even their religious instincts, and diverting their religious motives into a false channel. Some of the heresies which have sprung up in the Christian Church show us how men may be tempted to "turn the grace of God into

lasciviousness," and to wander from the path of allotted duty under high-sounding pretexts, and in the very name of religion. It is here especially that we need the safeguard of a true and single aim. We need an eye to detect the false prophet. We need power to unmask the angel of darkness. And there can be no doubt that the grand "Ithuriel's spear" is purity of motive—a simple, single desire to do God's will, to build up our own character in real goodness, and to build up His cause and kingdom on the earth.

We know how, when a greater than Nehemiah came to lay the foundations of a new and spiritual Jerusalem, He too had to meet the wiles of the enemy. Thrice did Satan come to Jesus with his seductive whisper; and thrice did the pure simplicity of Jesus unmask his stratagem. And here also an appeal was made to religious motives. "Prove your trust in God by casting yourself down from the pinnacle!" "You wish to rule as Messiah over the whole earth; only pay me a little homage, and you may have all the kingdoms of the world, to do with them as you

please!" But Jesus, bent simply on doing His Father's will, and on laying the foundations of a true Kingdom of God, met all this manœuvring with his simple, childlike "It is written." So, too, when some of the Pharisees came and said to Him, "Get Thee hence, for Herod desireth to kill Thee," Jesus at once penetrated their trick. They simply sought to stop His work in Galilee. They did not really believe that Herod wished to kill Him. Either they simply invented the report themselves, or (as is perhaps more probable) they were acting in concert with Herod, who may have shared their desire to frighten Jesus out of the district.

But Jesus knew that He was safe from the hands of Herod. The conscience of the weak and sensual Tetrarch was already sufficiently haunted by the memory of the murdered Baptist. Jesus would complete the work which He was now doing in spite of these tricks of intimidation. "Go ye, and tell *that fox*, Behold, I cast out devils, and I do cures to-day and to-morrow, and the third day I shall be perfected."

It was true, indeed, that His special work in Galilee would soon be done; He was already journeying towards Jerusalem: but they are to understand that He will not alter His plans of action, or quit their neighbourhood one hour sooner, because of their cunning manœuvres.

Now, surely, in all this our Lord has "left us an example, that we should follow His steps." It is when we are trying to serve God *and* Mammon, when we have one eye on our duty and the other on our own selfish inclination, that we are most liable to be led astray by the wiles of seduction or intimidation. Even when men "do evil that good may come," it is often because they are more bent on their own success in well-doing, than on simply promoting and accomplishing the will of God. They cannot bear the thought of being thwarted in their projects, or they are unwilling that the honour of achievement should pass out of their own hands. They forget that it is better nobly to fail than basely to succeed. A pure and simple regard for what God wishes them to do would lead them

to consider methods as well as ends—the weapons they wield, as well as the victory they seek.

Let us, therefore, remain ever true to conscience ; and when conscience doubts and hesitates, let us wait and ask God for light. And that we may receive the heavenly light when it comes to us, let us seek ever to keep “ the single eye ! ”

IX.

THE CITY REPLENISHED.

"The streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in the streets thereof."—*Zechariah* viii. 5.

"It shall be lifted up, and inhabited in her place, from Benjamin's gate unto the place of the first gate, unto the corner-gate, and from the tower of Hananeel unto the king's wine-presses. And men shall dwell in it, and there shall be no more utter destruction ; but Jerusalem shall be safely inhabited."—*Zechariah* xiv. 10, 11.



IX.

THE CITY REPLENISHED.

Nehemiah vii., xi., xii. 1-26.

THE great work of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem having been at length completed, Nehemiah at once took further measures for promoting the security and prosperity of the city. The circumstances of the time were exceptional, and demanded exceptional precautions. There was danger lest the very success of the Jews in re-fortifying Jerusalem might so irritate their jealous foes as to lead to a united attack on the new fortifications. Nehemiah therefore appointed as responsible guardians of the city two men whom he could thoroughly trust—his own brother Hanani, and Hananiah, the ruler of the citadel, a faithful

and God-fearing man. To these two men he gave express orders regarding the opening and shutting of the city gates, and the appointment of an adequate band of watchmen who should guard the city both by day and by night. Then, further, he adopted the important measure of replenishing Jerusalem with inhabitants; for, in comparison with the large area which was now once more enclosed by the walls, the number of citizens and of habitable houses was but small. He tells us that "God put it into mine heart to gather together the nobles, and the rulers, and the people, that they might be reckoned by genealogy." The object of this census was doubtless to furnish a basis for some practical method of increasing the population of the metropolis. Meanwhile, in the prosecution of his project, Nehemiah found a register of the Jews who had originally returned from the exile and settled in Judæa: and here, in this seventh chapter, he copies out this genealogical register as a document of historic value. It is essentially the same register as that which we find in the second chapter of the Book of Ezra, although there

See Gen.

are some variations which are probably due to the errors of transcribers. We can well believe that this list of "Pilgrim Fathers" would be scanned with interest by many succeeding generations.¹ One point is worthy of our own special notice. All those who came back from the exile are here spoken of, generally, as "the people," or "the children of *Israel*." At the head of the list stand twelve names, which are probably to be regarded as pointing to the twelve tribes of which the nation was originally composed. We learn also from the Book of Ezra that, when the rebuilt temple was dedicated to God, a "sin-offering" was presented for "all *Israel*, twelve he-goats, according to the number of the tribes of *Israel*." From all this it is evident that the returned

¹ It has, indeed, been contended that the register here given by Nehemiah is really the census which was taken by himself, and that it was afterwards inserted in the Book of Ezra out of its chronological order. But surely such a confusion of documents on the part of any chronicler is exceedingly improbable. Moreover, the register is described as enumerating the children of the province "who came with *Zerubbabel*," etc.; from which we naturally infer that in what follows we have a list of "them which came up at the first." Of course, in this case, the "*Nehemiah*" who is here mentioned (vii. 7) along with *Zerubbabel* as one of the leaders of the returned exiles, is not the *Nehemiah* who writes this book.

colonists regarded themselves as representative, not merely of the kingdom of Judah, but of the entire nation in its original unity. We may also remark, in passing, that the "Nethinim" who are mentioned in this register were a body of servants who assisted the Levites by discharging the more laborious duties connected with the Temple ritual. Their names appear to indicate that they were not of Hebrew origin. Some of them were probably descendants of the Gibeonites, who are mentioned in the Book of Joshua as having been made "hewers of wood and drawers of water for the House of God." Others of them were probably descendants of those "whom David and the princes had appointed for the service of the Levites,"¹ and who were perhaps foreigners, captured in war. Along with these Nethinim are mentioned "the children of Solomon's slaves," who were doubtless also a body of bondsmen engaged in the rougher work of the Levitical service. It is a somewhat significant circumstance that so many of these Temple-servants should have

¹ Ezra viii. 20.

been willing to return from the land of exile to their menial duties.

Passing on now to the eleventh chapter, we there find an account of the manner in which Nehemiah carried out his resolution to replenish Jerusalem with inhabitants. Having doubtless, according to his intention, taken a census of the entire province, he now determined that one-tenth of the people dwelling outside Jerusalem should take up their abode within the city. We can easily understand that, whilst Jerusalem had remained unfortified, and therefore open to the incursions of its enemies, it would not be an attractive or popular place of residence. Even now, when its walls were rebuilt, it was still the centre of danger; and those who were comfortably settled in the country districts might naturally hesitate to transfer their homes to the metropolis. The matter was therefore determined by casting lots; and one in every ten of the people was thus removed to the capital. It appears, however, that some were patriotic enough to "offer themselves willingly to dwell in Jerusalem;" and such volunteers received

the praise and benediction of the whole community.

The eleventh chapter also contains a list of "the chief of the province that dwelt in Jerusalem," after the city was thus replenished. It further contains a list of the other towns and villages of Judah and Benjamin, where "the residue of Israel dwelt." Then follows, at the beginning of the twelfth chapter, a list of the heads of the priestly and Levitical houses, from the time of Zerubbabel down to "the days of Nehemiah and Ezra." These various lists are probably taken from the genealogical census made by Nehemiah when he was engaged in his project of repeopling the capital. As for this project itself, it was altogether worthy of his practical sagacity. The restored walls of Jerusalem could not do much to promote its security and welfare, so long as it was inhabited by a mere handful of people. Nehemiah doubtless felt that, under God, the chief strength of the city lay, after all, in its citizens, and that the prosperity of the whole province would largely depend on the prosperity of the metropolis. It was

therefore a wise and statesman-like policy to strengthen the internal as well as the external defences of Jerusalem, and to interest the whole community in the permanent welfare of the capital. It would be well if some of our modern statesmen were to grasp the principle of this policy, and open their eyes to the fact that the chief wealth and strength of any nation must ever lie, not in massive fortifications or colossal armies, but in the numbers, the character, the patriotism, and the prosperity of its people. In the Christian Church also we are apt to place too much reliance on mere outward organization, on forms of ecclesiastical government, on special methods of Christian work and special schemes of Christian enterprise, and on the large sums of money which we can collect for the building of sanctuaries or the cause of missions. These things are all of great importance in their own place; and we have already seen that to disparage them is the token of an unwise "pietism." Nevertheless it remains true that the prosperity of the Christian Church chiefly depends, not indeed

on the number of its nominal adherents, but on the number of its genuine and loyal citizens. Especially does its progress depend, under God, on the number of those who volunteer to occupy the posts of special danger or of special usefulness. Even Christians who are unqualified for such posts, or who shrink from making such sacrifices, will ever be ready to "bless" those who "willingly offer themselves" for the special work of the Church. Behind all organization, and method, and money, we want *men*—men of courage, faith, and wisdom, able rightly to defend and to propagate the truth—men devoted to the welfare of Zion, and consecrated to the service of her King.

X.

THE FEAST OF GLADNESS.

"To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness."—*Isaiah* lxi. 3.

"Again I will build thee, and thou shalt be built, O virgin of Israel: thou shalt again be adorned with thy tabrets, and shalt go forth in the dances of them that make merry."—*Jeremiah* xxxi. 4.

"Rejoice in the Lord alway: and again I say, Rejoice."—*Philippians* iv. 4.



X.

THE FEAST OF GLADNESS.

Nehemiah viii.

EZRA now appears on the scene as associated with Nehemiah. Ezra was a priest who belonged to the order of the "scribes"—a class of men who gave themselves to the study of the sacred books. It was now about twenty years since he had come from the land of exile, to beautify the Temple, and re-invigorate the religious life of the new colony. He had given himself with zeal to the restoration of the Temple-worship, and to the work of moral reformation. And now that the people were rejoicing over the successful completion of Nehemiah's enterprise, now that the sight of their refortified city was

infusing into them new life and spirit, Ezra saw an opportunity of giving a religious direction to the common gladness, and of associating their quickened energy and hope with the thought of God. It was Jehovah, the God of their fathers, who had crowned their efforts with success, and who had anew laid for them the foundations of national prosperity. It was a fitting time to bethink themselves of His laws, and to bring their gladness into the light of His presence. And in the desire thus to quicken the religious life of the people, Ezra and Nehemiah were united ; the priest and the layman were one.

It was now the seventh month, the festal month of the Jewish year. The harvest had been gathered in, and the agricultural population were set free for their great annual holiday. And so the people gathered themselves together into an open space before one of the gates of Jerusalem—men, women, and children—such children, at least, as were old enough to understand the reading and exposition of the Scriptures. A pulpit of wood was erected for Ezra, and, in the sight of all, he

opened the book of the law of Moses, and read aloud to the assembly. He was surrounded by several priests and Levites, who aided him in this work of reading and expounding the law. For hours the crowd listened attentively to the words of the sacred book, and to the explanations given by Ezra and his associates. We are told that the Levites "read distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused the people to understand the reading." It is to be feared that nowadays there are some Christians who, although they almost worship the Bible, care little for an intelligent understanding of its contents. The sacred Scriptures are useful to us in proportion as they help us to worship God more reverently, intelligently, and spiritually; and therefore we truly honour them by diligently seeking to understand their real sense, and to profit by their meaning.

The simple reading and explanation of the Scriptures by Ezra and the Levites produced a profound impression on the assembled crowds. "All the people wept when they heard the words of the law." Many of the

laws and customs prescribed by Moses had doubtless fallen into disuse; and the people felt that they had been neglecting their duty. Many of the searching words of the old book would reach their hearts and consciences, and remind them how they had been forgetting the God of their fathers. But Ezra and Nehemiah checked the outburst of lamentation. They felt that, if the contrition of the people should deepen into despondency and gloom, their energies would be weakened; and so they reminded the multitudes that they were assembled to keep a feast—not a fast—and that it was their immediate duty to rejoice with thankfulness in the presence of Jehovah. “Go your way,” said Nehemiah; “eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and send portions unto them for whom nothing is prepared: . . . neither be ye sorry; for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”

The Jewish religion was of an eminently festal character. Its “holy days” were many of them “feast days.” In this feature it presented a striking contrast to some of the pagan religions. The worshipper of Baal or Moloch

had his soul filled with dark, superstitious terrors ; one of his main endeavours was to bribe his god to refrain from injuring him. Doubtless this superstitious fear had its reaction at times in a wild and frenzied mirth ; but this mirth was too often associated with the most debasing sensuality. The Jew, on the contrary, was taught to unite the ideas of holiness and gladness, of festivity and worship. He was not to cringe before God in terror. Jehovah was the King of Israel ; and the people were to rejoice in their Almighty Protector.

Now, of all the Jewish festivals, that which was held in the seventh month presented the most joyous aspect. It was the Feast of Tabernacles. It lasted for a week, and it had both an agricultural and a historical reference. Coming at the close of the agricultural year, it was a kind of "harvest-home," when, the hearts of the people being naturally filled with gladness, they gave praise to the Bestower of all their mercies. It had also, however, a historical reference. It pointed back to the time when the Israelites, in journeying from

Egypt to Canaan, had dwelt in tents in the wilderness. The object of this commemoration was doubtless to cherish the feeling of humble and thankful dependence upon God. Men who attain to a position of wealth and power are sometimes apt to forget "the hole from which they have been digged." In their pride they begin to speak and act as if they had never known difficulty or hardship. But the Israelites, after they were settled in the walled towns and cities of Canaan, were not to forget the sojourn in the wilderness. They were to commemorate the time when their fathers lived in tabernacles; and in order to bring this past more vividly before their minds, it was prescribed that, for a week, they should themselves dwell in booths. It seems, however, that after the days of Joshua this special feature of the Feast of Tabernacles had fallen into disuse, or at any rate had not been observed by the whole body of the people. But now when, in the course of reading the Scriptures, Ezra and the Levites came to this prescription about the booths, the people were filled with an enthusiastic desire to observe the

old law according to the letter. And so they went forth and gathered branches of trees, and made booths in the courts and on the flat roofs of their houses, and in the courts of the Temple and in other open spaces of the city ; and the whole congregation sat under these booths. It must have been a gay and festal sight. "There was," we are told, "very great gladness." And this gladness was associated with the thought of God ; for every day throughout the festival the sacred books were read in the hearing of the people. This was the kind of gladness which was likely to fortify them for the defence of their refortified city, inspiring them with a joyous sense of God's presence and favour. As Nehemiah had said, "the joy of the Lord" was their "strength."

Now, it is true that Christianity, as a religion, has not quite this same aspect of lightsome gladness and external mirth. The Gospel of Christ, in deepening our nature makes us capable of a profounder sadness. Our one religious feast—the Lord's Supper—is the commemoration of a death. Our faith looks back to the awful tragedy of the

cross. Christ Himself was "the man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;" and His anguish was, in large measure, due to the very perfection of His nature. There is an old proverb, "He that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow;" and the Gospel has increased our knowledge both of God and of man. We know more of God's feeling towards sin and sinners; and therefore we realize more intensely the severities of His holy love. We have also a wider outlook on mankind than the Jew ever had; we have a sense of the brotherhood of the race, which fills us with sadness when we think of the miseries that oppress the world. Sin, too, is a more terrible thing to human thought, since Christ bore its burden, and condemned it by His sacrifice. Our own past iniquities send a pang to our hearts whenever we think of them. We have, further, the highest ideal of life set before us in the Gospel; and we are dissatisfied because we come so far short of it. Then, in proportion, too, as we receive the Spirit of Christ, our sympathy with others takes on a keener edge; and this again in-

volves a keener grief. Indeed, the call to follow the steps of Jesus includes a summons to enter into "the fellowship of His sufferings." Thus it ought never to be denied that Christianity brings with it a sorrow peculiarly its own.

But, on the other hand, it is just as true that Christianity brings with it a peculiar joy. Its religious gladness may be less jocund and mirthful than that of Judaism; it may be calmer and less demonstrative; but it is also deeper, and less subject to the mere influence of outward circumstance. God in Christ is revealed to us as our Father in heaven. If we have a keener sense of the guilt of sin, we have also a firmer grasp of the Divine forgiveness. If we have a more intense realization of the miseries of the world, we have also a clearer view of the loving purpose and the righteous will lying beneath and behind them all. And if a deeper human sympathy involves a keener grief, it also brings a higher blessedness. Christian joy may exist in the midst of sorrow; and even when it is no longer a conscious gladness, it may neverthe-

less, abide as a quiet peace in which lie latent the germs of a holy ecstasy. Christ Himself, the man of sorrows, spoke of "My peace"—"My joy;" and spoke also of imparting this peace and joy to His disciples. "As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing," was the keynote to which Paul's life was set. Our feast of the Supper commemorates a death; but this very death was our redemption; and the blood "shed for the remission of sins" has its emblem in the wine that "maketh glad the heart of man."

Still, therefore, does it remain true that "the joy of the Lord is our strength." Sorrow has its own blessed and purifying ministries; but mere sorrow weakens; and "the sorrow of the world worketh death." Remorse cripples and despair paralyzes the energies of the soul. Sorrow, without faith, or hope, or love, only tends to eat the heart out of a man. But a pure joy is always an inspiration. It refreshes and exhilarates the whole nature. It helps to fortify the soul against the assaults of the devil. See how the joy of a pure human affection will often lift a young man

right out of the range of low, sensual temptations, and fire his soul with noble and worthy ambitions. And if this be true even of the joy of a human love, can we wonder that it should be true of "the joy of the Lord," the joy which springs from the realization of God's protection and favour? When a man is plunged into gloomy despondency, when "a web is woven across the sky," and he loses sight of God, he may also lose heart to defend the citadel of the soul. Despair will sometimes even play the traitor, and open the gates to the enemy. Thus men often try to drown care in dissipation, and give themselves up to a recklessness which leads to spiritual ruin.

Christian joy is even commanded as a duty. "Rejoice in the Lord alway : and again I say, Rejoice." If it were simply said to us, "Rejoice !" we might sometimes feel as if the command were only a mockery. But "*Rejoice in the Lord !*" this points us to the secret ; this explains why joy can be spoken of as a duty. We are not, indeed, forbidden to weep ; we are only forbidden to "sorrow

as those who have no hope." It is true that, even here, natural temperament may modify religious experience ; there are those who are constitutionally prone to anxiety and melancholy. But we have all an indirect control over our own emotions. God is the Father of us all—not merely of those who are of a sanguine temperament. The Gospel summons us to faith in Him ; and in this faith lie the germs of a calm and holy joy. Much depends, therefore, on the direction in which we turn our thoughts. There is such a thing as nursing a morbid gloom. If we keep brooding remorsefully over our past sins, without laying hold of the pardon freely offered to us in the Gospel ; if we keep our eye fixed on our difficulties and troubles, and never look up to the Father who can "make them all work together for our good ;" if we keep hanging about the charnel-house, thinking of bones and dust, and never lift our thoughts to "the Father's house of many mansions ;" if we keep brooding over the miseries of the world, without any faith in that Divine purpose which "runs through the

ages," and which is seeking to lead on humanity to a glorious future ; then, indeed, there is no wonder that joy should be a stranger to our hearts. Verily to a thoughtful mind the outlook on the world and on the future is a dull and dreary one, if there be no faith in the living God ! But God has revealed Himself to us in His own Son, just that we might trust and love Him. It is right to sorrow over our transgressions and shortcomings ; but it is wrong to forget the grace of God. It is natural to grieve over our troubles, losses, bereavements ; but it is unnatural to turn away from the sunshine which God Himself sends us, and which falls even upon the grave. And therefore it is our duty to "rejoice in the Lord." This is the joy which makes us strong in spirit—not a mere light-hearted buoyancy of natural temperament—not a mere mirthful jollity which is as "the crackling of thorns under a pot"—far less an easy, "happy-go-lucky" indifference to the sorrows of the world—but "the joy of the Lord," the peace and gladness that spring from a sense of His Fatherly righteousness

and love. It is this that lifts us far above many a temptation, and strengthens us to defend the citadel of the soul. It is this, too, that strengthens us for all the enterprises of goodness. Every Christian worker can labour on with more energy and patience when he is rejoicing in the thought that it is God's purpose to prosper the Christian Jerusalem, and that it is His will "that all men should be saved, and should come to the knowledge of the truth."

XI.

THE FAST AND THE
COVENANT.

"In those days, and in that time, saith the Lord, the children of Israel shall come, they and the children of Judah together, going and weeping : they shall go, and seek the Lord their God. They shall ask the way to Zion with their faces thitherward, saying, Come, and let us join ourselves to the Lord in a perpetual covenant that shall not be forgotten."—*Jeremiah* l. 4, 5.

"Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep : let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He shall lift you up."—*James* iv. 9, 10.



XI.

THE FAST AND THE COVENANT.

Nehemiah ix., x.

ALTHOUGH Nehemiah and Ezra had discouraged a despondency which might only have proved enfeebling, they did not by any means wish to dissipate that sorrow for sin which the reading of the old law had awakened. It was right that the people should rejoice with thankfulness in the presence of God ; but it was also right that they should humble themselves in penitence at His footstool. And so, after the Feast came the Fast. A solemn day of humiliation was appointed, on which the multitudes, clothed in sackcloth, gathered themselves together, to make a united and public confession of their

sins, and to enter into a national covenant to amend their ways.

The ninth chapter contains the prayer which was offered to God on this occasion, in the name of the assembled people. It begins with adoration and thankful praise, and goes on to recite the dealings of Jehovah with Israel from the time when Abraham was called. It confesses the frequency with which Israel had rebelled against Jehovah, and acknowledges the righteousness of those chastisements with which He had visited their disobedience. It recognizes the captivity as a deserved punishment, and it justifies God even in relation to their present subjection to the sway of Persia. "Thou hast done right ; but we have done wickedly." The prayer does not presume to dictate or suggest to God how or when He is to come to their rescue : but it lays before Him their present subject and distressed condition, and casts Israel upon His abiding love.

Nor is this all. There is not only a confession of sin and supplication for mercy ; there is also a vow of amendment. The people through their leaders, enter into a solemn

"covenant" with Jehovah. A formal document was drawn up, in which they bound themselves by a sacred oath to "walk in God's law as it was given by Moses." The tenth chapter records the names of those who signed this document by affixing their "seals" to it. At the head of the list stands the name of Nehemiah "the Tirshatha;"¹ then follow the names of those who represented the priesthood and the nobility. And to this covenant, as thus signed by their leaders, the community in general agreed—men and women, and even the young people who were old enough to understand the matter, entering into a solemn vow to "observe the commandments of the Lord." More particularly, three points were specified on which the community had been remiss, and with regard to which they now promised amendment. The first point related to *intermarriage with the heathen*. The old law on this matter was very stringent; and

¹ The etymology of this word *Tirshatha* is doubtful. Some think that it means "cupbearer." But more probably it was the Persian *official* title of the Governor of Judæa; for it would seem that this same designation is given to Zerubbabel" (*Ezra* ii. 63; *Nehemiah* vii. 65, 70).

the purity of the Israelitish faith had been all along endangered by these mixed marriages. Latterly the people seem to have become even more lax in this respect; but now they promise that they will not give their daughters unto the people of the land, nor take the daughters of the heathen for their sons. The second point related to *Sabbatic observance*. They pledged themselves to a stricter regard for the Sabbath day, vowing that, if any of the people of the land brought wares or victuals for sale on the Sabbath, they would not buy from them on that day. They also pledged themselves to a stricter regard for the Sabbatic year, vowing to obey the law which required them to let the ground lie unsown every seventh year, and also to remit every seventh year the debts that were owing to them by their poorer brethren. The third point related to *the maintenance of the Temple worship*. It appears that those who had returned from the exile had not shown, in this matter, the zeal and self-denial which might well have been expected from them. The prophet Haggai had, during the governorship

of Zerubbabel, spoken bitterly of those who were dwelling in their own "cieled houses," and allowing the house of God to lie waste ; and now this selfishness was reappearing in a neglect of the Temple ritual. But here, in this covenant, the people pledge themselves to a careful maintenance of public worship ; they charge themselves with an annual Temple tax of one-third of a shekel ; they also promise to contribute their " first-fruits " and " tithes " for the support of the priests and Levites ; and they enter into an arrangement to provide wood in sufficient quantity for the fire which, according to the old law, was to be kept constantly " burning on the altar."¹

Now here surely was a genuine " revival "—a quickening and deepening of the religious life, which manifested itself not in a mere evanescent weeping, nor in a mere outburst of emotional gladness, but in a deliberate, resolute, and systematic amendment of conduct. And, after all, this is the crucial test of any re-

¹ The Jewish historian Josephus incidentally mentions a festival called Xylophoria (" wood-carrying "), which probably had its origin in this provision of the " covenant."

ligious revival—the extent to which it actually purifies and reforms the lives of those who come under its influence. You may point to large crowds meeting together to hear the Bible read and expounded, or to listen to the oratory of some eloquent preacher ; you may point to men and women weeping under the singing of some beautiful hymn ; you may point to multitudes who say that they have found “peace with God,” and that they are glad with a new-born joy. And such emotional results as these are not to be despised. It is well that human nature can be thus stirred ; and it may be well that men and women should be made to feel, even for a time, that there is a power in religion. But after all, the grand question is, has all this emotion led to any practical issue ? Has there been a genuine contrition for sin, and a genuine resolve to live a better life ? Has there been any elevation of the character, or at least any check given to deterioration and degeneracy ? Has the weeping been followed by the inward vow ? Has the peace with God been followed by a desire to please God ?

Has the admiration of the preacher's eloquence been accompanied by a personal and practical application of his message ? It is the answer which can be given to such questions as these that determines the value of any revival. For it may possibly be even dangerous to a man to have his sensibilities heightened when his conscience is never really touched, or to imagine that he is converted when it is simply his nerves that have been thrilled by the music of a beautiful hymn, or the excitement of a crowded audience. A true weeping for sin and a true joy in the Lord are evidenced by an inward covenanting to do His will, and a practical endeavour to amend the outward conduct.

This is the kind of revival which, ever and again, we all need. For we are constantly liable to fall below the level of our Christian privileges. We are also apt to grow blind to our own defects, and to under-estimate the extent of our own shortcomings. We have need to bring our lives into the light of God's holy law, and into the light of the life of Christ, that our consciences may be awakened

to a truer and deeper penitence. And surely we, like these Jews of old, have reason to acknowledge that we have deserved God's chastisements, and that we need His discipline. Would it not be well for us to consecrate ourselves afresh to His service, and to cast ourselves anew on His mercy? And, if we were only to examine thoughtfully our own characters and lives, should we not find abundant scope for holy resolution and practical amendment?

Let us remember, too, that a repentance which is the fruit of a true revival of the religious life, naturally goes into details of conduct, confessing particular sins and failures, and resolving on special improvement. We have seen how these "covenanters" of Nehemiah's time specified three practical reforms, which it was their promise and purpose to carry out in their lives. And although we are not Jews, yet it might be well for us to examine ourselves even with reference to the analogous points in our Christian conduct. For many of the Jewish prescriptions, which are no longer binding

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upon us, were based on abiding principles which have a permanent claim upon the conscience. Thus the law against mixed marriages was doubtless intended to guard the purity of Israel's faith and of Israel's testimony to the one living and true God, and to preserve the Jews from lapsing into the idolatries and immoralities of the heathen. Now, is it not the case that for a Christian to marry one who is ungodly is full of peril to the spiritual life? Is it not the case that, in proportion to the depth of any revival of religion in the Church, there will be a shrinking from such marriages as these? Let parents examine themselves in this matter, and ask themselves whether they would really prefer that a daughter should marry a good and godly man in humble life, than a mere man of the world, however rich or however brilliant. Ah! men kneel before Him who was once a carpenter in Nazareth, and then rise from their knees to go away and practically "blaspheme the holy penury of the Son of God!" Then, again, although our Christian Sunday is not hedged round by

the same restrictions as the Jewish Sabbath, yet it is given to us as a boon from God for the recruiting of our nature, and as a means of spiritual culture. May we not do well to examine ourselves as to whether we are making the best use of the day — whether we are so employing its hours as to recruit ourselves for God's service, and to be aided in entering into His rest? And then, too, although we have no central Temple to support, yet we have our ordinances of public worship; we have our buildings for common prayer; we have our "Levites" who read and expound the Scriptures; and the Christians of to-day may well ask themselves whether they are as faithful as they ought to be in their personal attendance on the public worship of God, and whether, according to their ability, they bear their share in maintaining the ordinances, the ministers, and the missionaries of the Church.

It is in this spirit that we ought to take ourselves to task, if we would reform our lives in the light of God. True, the grand matter is that our hearts be right with Him, that

there be a real spiritual life beating within us. The prime necessity is that we should go to our Father through Christ, who died for us, and be reconciled to Him, and cast ourselves in penitence and faith on His pardoning and cleansing grace. If we have not done this, all outward reforms of conduct may be but a poor affair. God is looking for fruit, not for mere sculpture. He wishes to see in our lives those virtues which are the natural and living outcome of a heart that is right with Him. But, on the other hand, the root of the matter may be in us, and yet there may be need for culture. The fruit of a tree may vary in amount and richness according to the attention bestowed on its cultivation. If we are sincerely penitent, let us seek to turn the spirit of penitence to practical account. It will not do merely to say, "We have sinned times and ways without number;" or, "We have done the things we ought not to have done, and have left undone the things we ought to have done." Perhaps it is *some one sin* which is burdening the conscience most. If so, we must confess *that*; we must re-

nounce *that* ; we must resolve and struggle, by the help of the Holy Spirit, to amend *that*. We must make restitution where restitution is possible ; and we must be on our guard against the special temptation that is our special danger. Thus, if we would make spiritual progress, we must seek to direct the spiritual life within us into channels of practical improvement. We must seek to bring those higher motives which have power within us into special contact with this and that detail of our character and conduct.

Say, for example, that you are a husband. How, then, are you treating your wife ? Is there no need for greater tenderness, for more thoughtful consideration ? Remind yourself of the lofty ideal of the Christian law of marriage : "As Christ loved the Church, and gave Himself for it." Have you no new resolves to make here ? Or, again, as a parent, what is your treatment of your children ? Are you peevish, impatient, and passionate ? Are you winning their love ? Are you setting before them the example of a sweet and godly life ? Are you seeking to

train them with the tenderness and firmness of an unselfish affection? Have you no new resolves to make here? Or, again, as a son or daughter, what is your treatment of your parents? Are you showing them a becoming respect? Are you obedient to their commands, and considerate of their wishes? Or, if you have grown up, and they are growing old, are you showing them those little attentions of a reverent and tender sympathy which are so precious to a parent's heart? Have you no new resolves to make here? And so with all the other relationships of life; as brother or sister; as master or servant; as teacher or pupil; as a man of business, in your buying and selling; as a citizen, in your political action; is there nothing to amend? Or, again, it may be that some evil habit is creeping over you, that envy, or jealousy, or irritability of temper is growing, because you have not curbed it as you ought, or that self-indulgence is leading you on, inch by inch, in the direction of intemperance, or that avarice is laying upon you its blighting hand, or that you are beginning to neglect

secret prayer. Oh ! whatever it may be that specially needs watching or reformation, put your finger on it in the sight of God. Let us not indulge in mere generalities ; but, as these Jews of old did, let us specify before God what we know to be wrong, and, consecrating ourselves afresh to the service of Christ, let us define to our own souls what it is in our character and conduct that we wish and purpose, by God's grace, to amend.

XII.

THE DEDICATION OF THE
WALL.

"The Lord doth build up Jerusalem : He gathereth together the outcasts of Israel. . . . Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem ; praise thy God, O Zion. For He hath strengthened the bars of thy gates ; He hath blessed thy children within thee."—*Psalm* cxlvii. 2, 12, 13.

"In everything give thanks : for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you."—1 *Thessalonians* v. 18.



XII.

THE DEDICATION OF THE WALL.

Nehemiah xii. 27-47.

THE completion of Nehemiah's enterprise was celebrated by a religious and festal "dedication" of the city wall. It was felt to be a fitting thing that there should be a public service of thanksgiving to God for the favour which He had thus shown to Jerusalem. And this service of grateful and joyful praise was accompanied by a ceremonial "purifying" of "the people, and the gates, and the wall," and a formal consecration to God of the work which had been brought to a successful issue. The priests and Levites and singers of the community were all gathered together, and, along with the princes of Judah,

were formed into a grand procession. This procession was divided into two companies, the one being headed by Ezra, and the other closed by Nehemiah. These two companies marched, it would seem, upon the wall itself, and in opposite directions ; both doubtless praising God, as they marched, with psalms and instruments of music. Thus, between them, they would probably make the entire circuit of the wall ; and the twofold procession seems to have been arranged in such a manner as that both companies met at the Temple. There they united together in their songs of praise ; and, in the name of the assembled multitudes, sacrifices were offered in the House of the Lord. It was a great day for Jerusalem. The gladness of the people was exuberant. It was heightened by the thought of the troubles through which they had passed, by the memory of their labours and their vigils, by the victory which they had thus won over their enemies, and by the hope that brighter days were now in store for Jerusalem. The very children, we are told, shared in the gladness and excitement of the hour ;

and Nehemiah adds, with a touch of triumph in his picture, that "the joy of Jerusalem was heard even afar off."

Now, may we not learn a lesson from this simple and joyous piety of Nehemiah and his countrymen? Would it not be well if there were more praise in our worship, more gratitude in our religious life? Do we always remember that "except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it?" When we have brought any of our projects to a successful termination, are we careful to give thanks to Him who has given us prosperity? Alas! there are many men whose projects are so base, and whose methods are so unworthy, that they dare not think of God in connection with them at all, dare not ask God's blessing upon them, dare not thank Him when they are successful in their aims! The prime necessity, therefore, is that our enterprises and labours be of such a character that we can bring them into the light of God, and can dedicate their results to Him. Thus the man of business, for example, ought to see to it that he can ask the Divine blessing

on his commercial projects and methods ; and then, if he is in any wise prospered in his labour, he ought not to forget to render thanks to God. There are little Nebuchadnezzars in the world, as well as great—men who strut about as if they would say—"Is not this the Babylon which I have built, by the might of *my* power, and for the honour of *my* majesty?" There is really little excuse for this folly. Such a man must have lived long enough to know that "the race is not always to the swift, nor the battle to the strong." He must have known men who began life with as much energy and practical sagacity as himself, but who have been far less prosperous. You may have been persevering and industrious, but who has given you all your energy? Who has bestowed upon you the health and strength without which you could not have carried on your labour?

Oh, recognize with joyful thankfulness the Giver of all your mercies ; and if you have had to contend with difficulties and trials, be all the more thankful to Him who has en-

abled you to conquer them ! Come with your offering of praise to the Father in heaven, and dedicate to Him the fruits of your toil. Ask Him to direct you as to the best use you can make of the prosperity which He Himself has given you. For a man's success may prove only a curse to him, if it merely puffs him up with pride and vain-glory, or hardens him in selfishness, or leads him to forget his dependence on, and his responsibility to, his Maker.

Then, again, as patriots, let us give thanks to God for our national prosperity. We can scarcely take up a map of the world, and look at the size of our British islands, and then think of the extent of British rule and influence, without feeling that, in a very marked manner, the hand of God has been in our history. And yet how prone we are to magnify the mere instruments of our national greatness ! There used to be a way of speaking about "the wooden walls of old England," which savoured too much of what the prophet Habakkuk calls a "burning of incense to our own net." And still there is

danger enough lest we make our national *prestige* a kind of fetich. There is danger also lest, in these days of marvellous progress in the sciences and the industrial arts, we should fall into a kind of worship of mere material forces. "Some trust in chariots and horses;" perhaps *we* have been trusting too much in iron, and coal, and steam, and cotton manufactures! But what have we "that we have not first received?" Let us recognize the fact that the true prosperity of our country is dependent on the blessing of God, and let us thankfully dedicate to Him the position which He has given us among the nations. Then shall we be more concerned that Britain should have a world-wide reputation for liberty, justice, and magnanimity, than for the invincibility of her floating "walls."

In our religious life and work, also, let us thank God for our successes. He is the great Worker in His own vineyard; it is His sunshine and air that produce the blossom and the fruit. "Neither is he that planteth anything, neither he that watereth, but God that giveth the increase." It is our honour

and privilege to be used by Him as conscious and willing instruments in the rearing of that spiritual city whose stones are living souls. "The Lord doth build up Jerusalem." It is He who endows His servants with those faculties which qualify them to co-operate with Him in this great work. It is He who gives to the Truth its power over the heart: it is He who by His Spirit makes His appeal to the conscience. It is He who by His Providence opens new "doors" of usefulness, and thwarts the antagonism of the enemies of His kingdom.

And in the upbuilding also of our own character it is God who gives us success. "By the grace of God," said the Apostle, "I am what I am." The Holy Spirit is the Author of our sanctification; not, indeed, as operating upon us by any mechanical compulsion, but as taking the initiative in all our good resolves and endeavours. If, therefore, we have acquired any measure of self-control, if we have grown in humility, penitence, and holy desire, if our souls have become in any wise stronger to resist the assaults of temptation,

let us thankfully acknowledge the grace which has sheltered our weakness and inspired our struggles ; and, dedicating to God that which we are, let us press forward to that which we ought to be.

XIII.

THE PERSISTENT
REFORMER.

"Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed Me. But ye say, Wherein have we robbed Thee? In tithes and offerings."—*Malachi* iii. 8.

"I told you before, and foretell you, as if I were present, the second time ; and being absent now I write to them which heretofore have sinned, and to all other, that, if I come again, I will not spare."—*2 Corinthians* xiii. 2.



XIII.

THE PERSISTENT REFORMER.

Nehemiah xiii.

AFTER completing the special work for which he had obtained leave of absence, Nehemiah returned to his post of cupbearer at the Persian court. It would seem that his absence had extended over twelve years, which was probably a much longer period than he had at first anticipated. We can easily imagine that, after having spent twelve such eventful years in Jerusalem, he would thenceforth often turn a longing look from the palace of Susa towards the city for which he had so earnestly laboured. We can well conceive that the luxury of the Persian court may have even palled upon his taste, as his

heart yearned towards his distant countrymen. He must often have longed to know how it fared with them, and whether they were remaining faithful to the vows which they had taken. Doubtless he would receive, from time to time, intelligence as to the condition of affairs in Judah ; and probably this intelligence was of such a character as to make him eager to return and resume the work of reformation. At any rate, he once more obtained leave of absence from the Persian king ; and no sooner does he find himself again in Jerusalem, than he sets himself vigorously, and even vehemently, to correct those abuses which had again begun to manifest themselves during his absence.

Nehemiah was not afraid to rebuke evil in high quarters. We have already seen with what bravery he had formerly denounced the wealthy usurers who were oppressing their poorer brethren. And now we find him rectifying an abuse which had crept into the temple by an arrangement of Eliashib the high priest. It appears that Eliashib was related by marriage to Tobiah the Ammonite

and that he had given up to this Tobiah a chamber in the Temple which had previously been used as a storehouse for religious purposes. This profanation of the sanctuary was all the more gross, inasmuch as Tobiah was a heathen, and was moreover one of those chiefs who had been so bitterly opposed to the welfare of Jerusalem. Nehemiah's spirit was vexed by this conduct, and he soon made short work of the scandal. Although he was neither priest nor prophet, he cast forth all the household stuff of Tobiah out of the chamber, and commanded the room to be purified and to be restored to its former uses. The fervid zeal of this act reminds us of One who, at a later day, came into "His Father's house," and with the uplifted scourge of small cords drove forth the hucksters and money-changers from the sacred enclosure.

Then, again, Nehemiah found that the people had already begun to relapse into their former laxity with regard to the very points on which they had promised amendment. The vows of the covenant which had been drawn up and signed by the leaders of

the community were being violated. The Levites were unsupported in their ministry; men were buying and selling in Jerusalem on the Sabbath day; and some of the Jews had taken wives of the heathen, so that their own children were even growing up in ignorance of the Hebrew tongue. It is probably to this period that we are to assign the Book of Malachi. The utterances of the last of the prophets seem to imply that the Temple and the city walls had been rebuilt. The "burden" of his message is directed mainly against the slovenly manner in which the Temple service was conducted, and also against the scandal of intermarriage with idolaters. He denounces the priests for "polluting the altar" by sacrificing "lame and sick" animals—offering to God what they would not dare to offer to the Persian "governor." He denounces the people for withholding from "the storehouse" the "tithes" which were necessary for the adequate maintenance of the Temple ritual. He pictures the "crying" and the "weeping," at God's altar, of the divorced or despised wives

whose husbands had married idolatrous women. "The Lord hath been a witness between thee and the wife of thy youth, against whom thou hast dealt treacherously." "The Lord, the God of Israel, saith that He hateth putting away." The prophet also predicts that the Lord shall "suddenly come to His Temple," to "purify the sons of Levi," and to be a "swift witness" against those that were "profaning His covenant." Thus it would appear that Nehemiah was now aided by Malachi, just as Zerubbabel had been aided by Haggai and Zechariah.

It might, however, have been almost excusable if Nehemiah had now felt that the people were simply incorrigible, and had given up as hopeless all attempts at reformation. But, with the resolute and indomitable persistency of the true reformer, he once more set himself to attack and rectify these recurring abuses. He made fresh arrangements for the collection and distribution of the tithes; he gave orders that the gates of Jerusalem should be shut during the Sabbath day; and he treated with a rough and even violent vehemence

some of those who had intermarried with the heathen. In all this he may possibly have shown somewhat of the narrowness of the "Puritan ;" but none the less may we admire his sturdy courage, and the zeal for God which led him to persist in his endeavours to purify the religious and moral life of his countrymen. There is danger, in these modern days, lest, through fear of being "Puritanical," we slip into a kind of gelatinous religion, which has in it no backbone of moral vigour, which escapes fanaticism, but also lacks earnestness, which loses in depth what it gains in breadth, which is more tolerant of vice than of "narrowness," and which loses the tough persistency and the energetic zeal necessary for the work of reformation. A man may be very "liberal in his views ;" but is he also intense in his feelings? He may pride himself on not being a "Sabbatarian:" but is he making the best use of the day of rest? He tells us that he does not believe in making men moral by Acts of Parliament ; but is he trying in any other way to make men moral? He is not a bigoted sectarian ; but is he doing

anything at all, either for the denomination to which he belongs or for the Church Universal? He takes very charitable and tolerant views of human conduct; but is he of any use in the world? Did he ever "save a soul from death?" Is he even watchful of the morals of his own household? Ah! this is the great danger of some of us nowadays — this so-called "breadth," which lacks intensity, persistency, and enthusiasm!

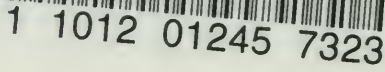
We know nothing for certain of Nehemiah's subsequent career. There are traditions which say that he lived to a good old age, and that he gathered together into one collection some of the sacred writings of his nation. Certainly the registers contained in his own book appear to indicate somewhat of the antiquarian or historic faculty; and we can well conceive that this fragment of autobiography was written when he was an old man. The ejaculation which recurs more than once in the course of his story, "Think upon me, my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people!"—"Remember me, O my

God, and wipe not out my good deeds that I have done for the House of my God!" is just the kind of ejaculation — not, perhaps, without a touch of self-complacency—which we might expect from an old man who has in his day "fought a good fight," and who is looking back with a kind of honest pride on his struggles and labours. His narrative closes with the same prayer: "Remember me, O my God, for good!" Perhaps the shadows of age were lengthening as he wrote these words; many of those who had been with him in his prime had doubtless passed away. A new generation may have sprung up, which had no recollection of the rebuilding of the wall; and perhaps the old man may have even felt that he was somewhat neglected amid the new prosperity which he had done so much to create. But he finds a certain satisfaction in reviewing those stirring times in which he had given himself so earnestly to the welfare of Jerusalem; he feels that his life has not been a useless one; and, whatever men may do with his name after he is gone, he appeals to God not to forget his pious and patriotic

labours : "Remember me, O my God, for good !"

And surely, even if there be a touch of self-complacency in this plaintive prayer, we may well pardon it, when we recollect what kind of man this Nehemiah had been. Doubtless he had his faults ; it would have been strange if he had not shown somewhat of the harsh impetuosity, or somewhat of the self-consciousness, that often characterize the ardent and successful reformer. Nevertheless his excellences were such that, even to this day, he stands before us as a stimulating example of earnest, prudent, and practical zeal in the cause of God and of man. His name has not been allowed to go down into oblivion. And although he lived in what some may be pleased to call a dark and narrow age, he was so faithful to the light he had, that his career is a practical rebuke to many of the enlightened Christians of the present day. Especially is he a model for men of practical business ability. Layman though he was, he did a noble work for Jerusalem which neither priest nor prophet could have so well accomplished.

He shows us what wealth can do when wealth is consecrated to the service of God. His life rebukes the men who shut themselves up in their own selfish money-getting or money-hoarding, and never manifest any public spirit on behalf either of their country or the Church of God. He shows us, too, what may be done in a community by even one man of practical sagacity and energetic zeal—how such a man can stir up others by his example and his influence, and can carry out his plans for the common good, in spite of enemies without and croakers within. Let us, then, take a practical lesson from this patriot and reformer of the olden time. Let us not shut ourselves up in our own individual and domestic interests. Let us extend our sympathies and efforts. Let us see what we can do, according to the special needs of our own time, to serve God and man in our day and generation.



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